NOVEL
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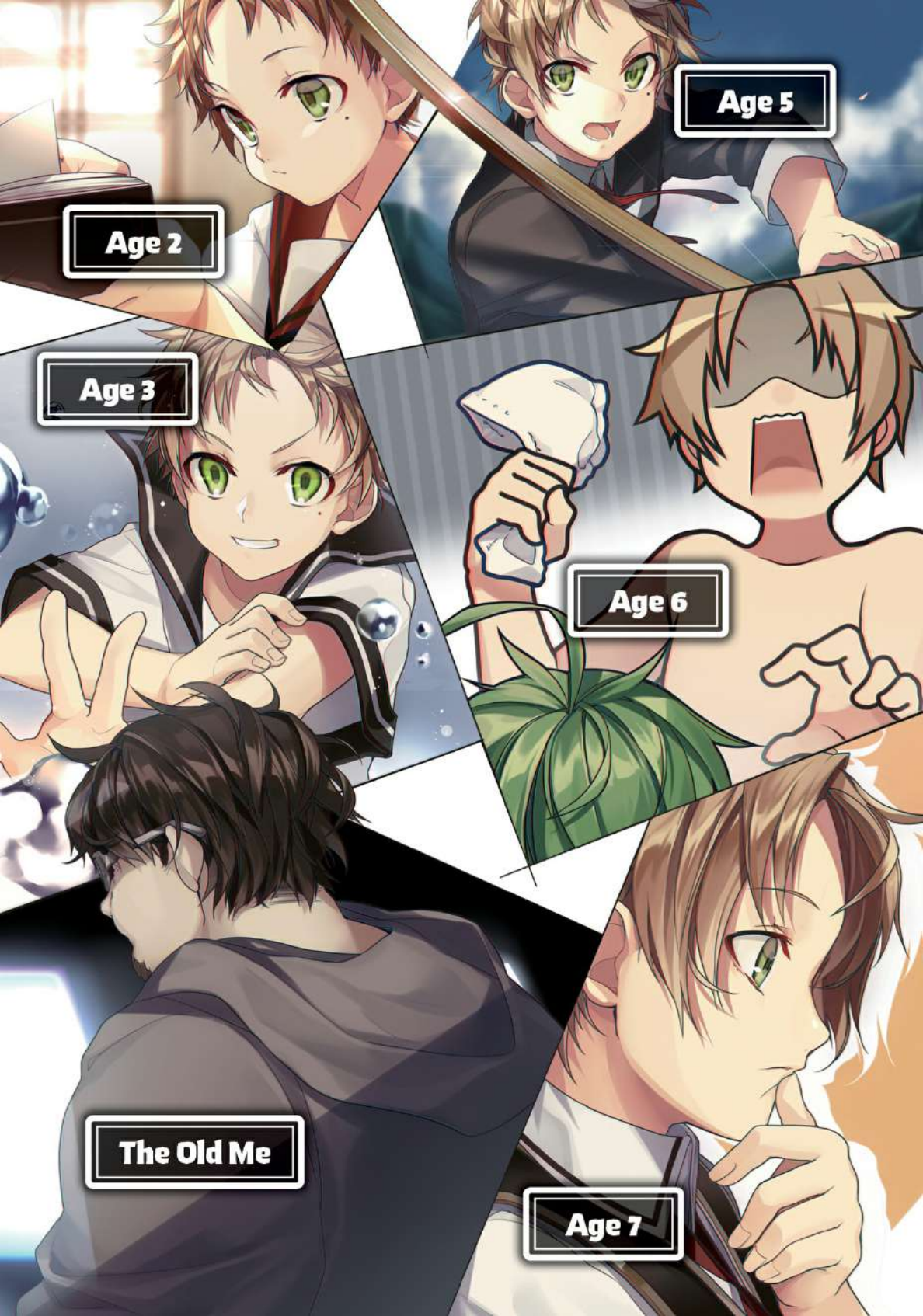
Age 5
Age 2
Age 3
Age 6
The Old Me
Age 7

MUSHOKU TENSEI
~ISEKAI IT'TARA HONKI DASU~ VOL. 1

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Illustrations by Shirotaka

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Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

MUSHOKU TENSEI **VOLUME 1: CHILDHOOD**

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"You're standing on the precipice of a cliff.
Step forward and smash into the ground below,
or stay where you are and endure constant
mockery; the choice is yours."

—I don't want to work, no matter what anyone says!

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
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Prologue

I was a thirty-four-year-old man with no job and nowhere to live. I was a nice guy, but I was on the heavy side, didn't have good looks going for me, and was in the midst of regretting my entire life.

I'd only been homeless for about three hours. Before that, I'd been the classic, stereotypical, long-time shut-in who wasn't doing anything with his life. And then, all of a sudden, my parents died. Being the shut-in that I was, I obviously didn't attend the funeral, or the family gathering thereafter.

It was quite the scene when they kicked me out of the house afterward.

My brash behavior around the house hadn't won anyone over. I was the sort of guy who'd bang on the walls and floors to get people's attention without leaving my room. On the day of the funeral, I was halfway through jerking off, my body arched in the air, when my brothers and sisters barged into my room in their mourning garb and delivered their letter formally disowning me. When I ignored it, my younger brother smashed my computer —which I valued more than myself—with a wooden bat. Meanwhile, my older brother, the one with a black belt in karate, stormed over in a blind rage and beat the crap out of me.

I just let it happen, sobbing uselessly all the while, hoping that would be the end of it. But my siblings forced me out of the house with nothing but the clothes on my back. I had no choice but to wander around town, nursing the throbbing pain in my side. It felt like I had a broken rib.

The biting words they hurled at me as I left our house would ring in my ears for the rest of my life. The things they said cut me to my very core. I was completely, totally heartbroken.

What the hell had I even done wrong? All I did was skip out on our parents' funeral so I could spank it to uncensored loli porn.

So, what in the world was I supposed to do now?

I knew the answer: look for a part- or full-time job, find myself a place

to live, and buy some food. The question was how? I had no idea how to even begin looking for a job.

Well, okay, I knew the basics. The first place I should check out was an employment agency—except I seriously had been a complete shut-in for over ten years, so I had no idea where any of those were. Also, I remembered hearing that those agencies only handled the introductions to job opportunities. You'd then have to take your résumé to the place with the job on offer and sit for an interview.

And here I was, wearing a sweatshirt caked in a mixture of sweat, grime, and my own blood. I was in no state for an interview. No one was going to hire some weirdo who showed up looking like I did. Oh, I'd make an impression, for sure, but I'd never land the job.

Moreover, I didn't know where they even sold résumé paper. At a stationery shop? The convenience store? There were convenience stores within walking distance, but I didn't have any money.

But what if I could take care of all that? With some luck, I could borrow some money from a loan company or something, buy myself some new clothes, and then purchase some résumé paper and something to write with.

Then I remembered: You can't fill out a résumé if you don't have an address or anywhere to live.

I was hosed. I finally realized that, despite having come this far, my life was completely ruined.

It started to rain. "Ugh," I grumbled.

Summer was over, bringing with it the autumn chill. My worn-out, years-old sweatshirt soaked up the cold rain, mercilessly robbing my body of precious heat.

"If only I could go back and do it all over again," I muttered, the words slipping unbidden from my mouth.

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I hadn't always been a garbage excuse for a human being. I was born to a well-off family, the fourth of five children, with two older brothers, an older sister, and a younger brother. Back in elementary school, everyone always praised me for being smart for my age. I didn't have a knack for academics, but I was good at video games and had an athletic bent. I got along with folks. I was the heart of my class.

In junior high, I joined the computer club, pored over magazines, and saved up my allowance to build my very own PC. My family, who didn't know the first thing about computers, barely gave it a second thought.

It wasn't until high school—well, the last year of junior high, I suppose—that my life got all messed up.

I spent so much time fixated on my computer that I neglected my studies. In hindsight, that was probably what led to everything else.

I didn't think I needed to study in order to have a future. I thought it was pointless. As a result, I wound up going to what was widely considered the worst high school in the prefecture, where the lowest of the delinquents went.

But even then, I figured I'd be fine. I could do anything I set my mind to, after all. I wasn't in the same league as the rest of these idiots. Or so I thought.

There was an incident from back then that I still remembered. I was in line to buy lunch from the school store when someone cut in front of me. Being the morally upstanding young man I was, I gave him a piece of my mind, getting all up in his face, striking an awkward, humorless, and self-conscious pose.

But as my luck would have it, this guy wasn't just an upperclassman, but one of the real nasty ones, vying to be the school's top dog. He and his buddies pounded my face swollen and puffy, then hung me from the school gate, buck naked, practically crucified for all to see.

They took a ton of pictures, which they circulated throughout the school like it was some simple prank. My social standing among my classmates plummeted to rock bottom overnight, leaving me with the nickname Pencil Dick.

I stopped going to school for over a month, holing up in my room instead. My father and older brothers saw the state I was in and told me to keep my chin up and not to give up and other patronizing things like that. I ignored it all.

It wasn't my fault. Who could bring themselves to go to school under circumstances like mine? Nobody, that's who. So, no matter what anyone said, I remained steadfastly holed up. All of the other kids in my class had seen those pictures and were laughing at me. I was sure of it.

I didn't leave the house, but with my computer and my internet connection, I was still able to kill plenty of time. I developed an interest in all sorts of things thanks to the internet, and I did all sorts of things as well. I constructed plastic model kits, tried my hand at painting figurines, and started my own blog. My mother would give me as much money as I could cajole out of her, almost like she was supporting me in all this.

Despite that, I gave up on all of these hobbies within a year. Anytime I saw someone who was better at something than me, I'd lose all motivation. To an outsider, it probably looked like I was just playing around and having fun. In reality, I was locked inside my shell with nothing else to do during my time alone.

No. In retrospect, that was just another excuse. I probably would have been better off deciding I wanted to be a manga artist and posting a silly little web comic online, or deciding I wanted to be a light novel author and serializing stories, or something like that. There were plenty of people in circumstances like mine who did that sort of thing.

Those were the people I made fun of.

"This stuff is crap," I'd snort derisively upon viewing their creations, acting like it was my place to be a critic when I hadn't done anything myself.

I wanted to go back to school—ideally to grade school, or maybe junior high. Hell, even going back a year or two would be fine. If I had a little more time, I'd be able to do something. I might have half-assed everything I'd ever done, but I could pick up where I'd left off. If I really applied myself, I could be a pro at something, even if I didn't wind up the best at it.

I sighed. Why hadn't I ever bothered to achieve anything before now?

I'd had time. Even if that time was all spent shut in my room in front of

the computer, there was plenty I could have done. Again, even if I wasn't the best, I would have accomplished something by being halfway decent and applying myself.

Like manga or writing. Maybe video games or programming. Whichever the case, with the proper effort, I could have gotten results, and from there, I could have made money and—

No. It didn't matter now. I hadn't made the effort.

Even if I could go back to the past, I'd only trip up again, stopped in my tracks by some similar obstacle. I hadn't made it through things that normal people managed to breeze through without thinking, and that's why I was where I was now.

Suddenly, amidst the downpour, I heard people arguing. "Hm?" I muttered. Was someone having a fight? That wasn't good. I didn't want to get involved with that sort of thing. Even as I was thinking that, however, my feet kept carrying me in that direction.

"Look, you're the one who—"

"No, you're the one who—"

What I saw when I rounded the corner were three high schoolers in the midst of what was clearly a lovers' quarrel. There were two boys and a girl, dressed in the now-vanishingly rare tsume-eri jackets and a sailor suit, respectively. The scene was almost like a battlefield, with one of the boys, an especially tall fellow, in a verbal spat with the girl. The other boy had interposed himself between the two in an attempt to placate them, but his pleas were completely ignored.

Yeah, I'd been in situations like that myself.

This sight brought back older memories. Back in junior high, I had one childhood friend who was real cute. And when I say cute, I mean like fourth- or fifth-cutest in the class. She wore her hair very short, since she was on the track team. Of every ten people she passed by on the street, at least two or three would turn to look back at her. Also, there was this one anime I was super into at the time, so I thought the track team and short hair thing was cute. Even her less-attractive attributes were fine by me.

She lived nearby, so we were in the same class for a lot of grade school

and junior high. All the way up to junior high, we often walked home together. We had plenty of chances to talk, but wound up arguing a lot. I did some regrettable things. To this day, I can get off three times in a row to the prompts “junior high,” “childhood friend,” and “track team.”

Come to think of it, I heard rumors she’d gotten married about seven years ago. And by “rumors,” I mean overhearing my siblings talking in the living room.

We certainly didn’t have a bad relationship. We’d known each other since we were little, so we were able to talk to each other pretty openly. I don’t think she ever had a thing for me, but if I’d studied harder and gotten into the same high school she did, or if I’d joined the track team and gotten admission that way, it might have sent the right signals. Then, if I’d told her how I felt, maybe we might have wound up dating.

Anyway, we’d get into fights on the way home, just like these three kids here. Or, if things went well, we’d hook up and do naughty things in some abandoned classroom after school.

(Shit, this sounds like the plot of some adult game I must’ve played.)

And then, I noticed something: There was a truck speeding right toward the group of three students. The driver was slumped over, asleep at the wheel.

The kids hadn’t noticed yet.

“Ah, h-hey, look…look out!” I shouted—or tried to, anyway. I’d barely spoken aloud in over a decade, and my already-weak vocal cords had further tightened due to the pain in my ribs and the chill of the rain. All I could muster was a pathetic, wavering squeak that was lost in the din of the downpour.

I knew I had to help them; at the same time, I didn’t know how. I knew that if I didn’t save them, five minutes later I’d wind up regretting it. Like, I was pretty sure seeing three teenagers splattered into paste by a truck moving at terrific speeds was something I’d regret.

Better to save them. I had to do something.

In all likelihood, I’d end up dead on the side of the road, but I figured that, if nothing else, having a bit of solace wouldn’t be so bad. I didn’t want

to spend my final moments mired in regret.

I staggered as I started to run. Ten-plus years of barely moving made my legs slow to respond. For the first time in my life, I wished I'd exercised more. My busted ribs sent a startling jolt of pain through me, threatening to bring me to a halt. For the first time in my life, I also wished I'd gotten more calcium.

Even so, I ran. I was capable of running.

The boy who'd been yelling noticed the truck approaching and drew the girl close to him. The other boy had looked away and hadn't spotted the truck yet. I grabbed him by the collar and yanked him behind me with all my might, then pushed him out of the vehicle's path.

Good. Now that left the other two.

At that very instant, I saw the truck right before me. I'd simply tried to pull the first boy to safety, but instead, I'd bodily switched places with him, putting me in harm's way. But that was unavoidable, and had nothing to do with the fact that I weighed over a hundred kilos; running at full speed, I'd simply stumbled a bit too far.

The instant before the truck made contact, a light blossomed behind me. Was I about to see my life flash before my eyes, like people said? It only lasted a moment, so I couldn't tell. It was all so fast.

Maybe that's what happens when your life is hollow and half-lived.

I was struck by a truck more than fifty times my weight and thrown against a concrete wall. "Hurgh!" The air was forced from my lungs, which were still spasming for oxygen in the wake of running flat out.

I couldn't speak, but I wasn't dead. My ample fat must have saved me.

Except the truck was still moving. It pinned me against the concrete, crushing me like a tomato, and then I was dead.

Chapter 1:
Is This Another World?

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was dazzling light. It grew to encompass my entire field of vision, and I squinted in discomfort.

Once my vision adjusted, I became aware of the blonde young lady gazing at me. She was one gorgeous girl—wait, no. She was definitely a woman.

Who is she? I thought.

By her side was a young man of roughly the same age, his hair brown, his awkward smile directed at me. He looked strong, proud, and impressively muscled.

Brown-haired and stubborn-looking? I ought to have reacted negatively the instant I saw this big oaf—but to my surprise, there was no feeling of ill will. His hair must have been dyed that color. It was a very fetching shade of brown.

The woman looked at me with a warm smile and spoke. Her words were oddly indistinct and difficult to make out, however. Was she even speaking Japanese?

The man said something in reply, his face losing some of its tension. I likewise had no idea what he said.

A third unintelligible voice joined the conversation, but I couldn't see who was speaking. I tried getting up to figure out where I was and to ask these people who they were. And let me tell you, I may have been a shut-in, but that didn't mean I didn't know how to talk to people. But somehow, all I could muster was this:

"Ahh! Waah!"

Nothing but garbled whining and moaning.

And I couldn't move my body. I mean, I could sort of move my fingertips and my arms, but I couldn't sit up.

The brown-haired man said something else, then suddenly leaned down

and picked me up. This was absurd! I weighed over a hundred kilos. How could he lift me that easily? Maybe I'd lost some weight after being stuck in a coma for a few weeks?

That was a pretty nasty accident I'd been in, after all.

There was a good chance I hadn't come out of it with all of my limbs. For the rest of the day, I dwelled on a single thought:

My life is going to be a living hell.

***

Let's jump ahead a month.

Apparently, I'd been reborn. The reality of my situation had finally set in: I was a baby.

I was finally able to confirm that after being picked up and having my head cradled so I could see my own body. But why did I still have all of my memories of my prior life? Not that I was complaining, exactly, but who would imagine someone being reborn with all their memories— to say nothing of that wild delusion actually being true?

The two people I first saw when I came to must have been my parents. If I had to guess, I'd say they were in their early twenties. Clearly younger than I'd been in my past life, at any rate. My thirty-four-year-old self would have written them off as kids.

I was jealous that they'd gotten to make a baby at that age.

Early on, I'd realized that I wasn't in Japan; the language was different, and my parents didn't sport Japanese facial features. They also wore what appeared to be some form of old-timey clothing. I didn't see anything that resembled home appliances; a woman in a maid outfit came by and cleaned with a rag. The furniture, eating utensils, and the like were all crudely fashioned from wood. Wherever this was, it didn't seem like it was a developed nation.

We didn't even have electric lighting, only candles and oil lamps. Perhaps my parents were so poor that they couldn't afford to pay the electric

bill.

But how likely was that, really? Seeing as they had a maid, I figured that they must have money, but maybe the maid was my father's sister, or my mother's. That wouldn't be too odd. She'd at least help out with the housekeeping, right?

I had wished that I could go back and do everything over again, but being born to a family that was too poor to pay for utilities wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind.

***

Another half a year went by.

After six months of listening to my parents conversing, I'd begun to pick up some of the language. My English grades had never been great, but I guess it's true what they say about how sticking solely to your native tongue makes it harder to advance in your studies. Or maybe, given that I had a new body, my brain was better suited to learning this time? I felt like I had an unusual knack for remembering things, perhaps because I was still so young.

Around this time, I started learning to crawl as well. Being able to move was a marvelous thing. I'd never been so grateful to have control of my own body.

"As soon as you take your eyes off him, he slips off somewhere," my mother said.

"Hey, so long as he's good and healthy," my father replied, watching me as I crawled around. "I was worried back when he was born and he never cried."

"He doesn't cry now, either, does he?"

I wasn't exactly the age to whine because I was hungry. The times I let the wailing out were when I tried, and invariably failed, to stop myself from soiling my pants.

Even though I could only crawl, I learned a lot from being able to move around. The first thing I learned was that this was definitely the home

of a rich family. The house was a wooden, two-story structure with over five separate rooms, and we had the one maid on staff. At first, I'd assumed she was my aunt or something, but given her deferential attitude toward my mother and father, I doubted she was family.

Our house was located in the countryside. Outside the windows stretched a peaceful, pastoral landscape.

There were few other houses, just two or three nestled amidst the wheat fields on any given side. We really were out in the sticks. I couldn't see any telephone poles or streetlights. There might not even be a power station nearby. I'd heard that in some countries they ran power cables underground, but if that were the case here, it was strange that our house didn't have electricity.

This place was way too pastoral. It grated on me, since I was used to the comforts of modern civilization. Here I was, having been reborn, practically dying to get my hands on a computer.

But all of that changed early one afternoon.

As the things I could do were pretty limited, I decided I'd look at the scenery. I clambered onto a chair as I usually did in order to get a peek out through the window, and then my eyes went wide.

My father was in our yard, swinging a sword around.

What in the world was he doing? He was old enough to know better than that. Was this the kind of person my dad was? Some sort of fantasy dweeb?

Uh-oh. In my daze of astonishment, I started slipping from the chair.

My underdeveloped hands grabbed the chair, but couldn't support my weight—not with how top-heavy my head made me—and I fell.

I hit the floor with a thud and immediately heard a cry of alarm. I saw my mother drop the load of laundry she was carrying, her face going pale as she brought her hand to her mouth.

"Rudy! Are you all right?!" She rushed to my side and picked me up. As she met my gaze, her expression slackened with relief, and she stroked my head. "Aw, you're fine, see?"

Easy there, lady, I thought. *Careful with my head. I just whacked that*

thing.

Given how panicked she'd looked, I must have had a pretty nasty fall. I mean, I did land right on my head. Maybe I was going to be permanently stupid. Not that that would be a change from the usual.

My head was throbbing. I tried to reach for the chair, but couldn't muster the energy. My mother didn't seem so nervous now, though, so I probably wasn't bleeding or anything. Just a bump or something, in all likelihood.

She peered carefully at my head. The look on her face suggested that, injury or no, she was taking this pretty seriously. Finally, she rested her hand atop my head. "Just to be on the safe side…" she began. "*Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again—Healing*!"

What the heck? Was that this country's version of kissing the boo-boo to make it all better? Or was she another fantasy nerd like my sword-swinging father? Was this a case of the Fighter marrying the Cleric?

But as I thought that, my mother's hand shone with a dim light, and the pain in my head was instantly gone.

Bwuh?

"There we go," she said. "All better! You know, Mommy used to be a pretty famous adventurer." Her voice rang with pride.

My mind reeled in confusion, various terms whirling through my mind: sword, fighter, adventurer, healing, incantation, cleric…

Seriously—what just happened?

My father, having heard my mother's earlier scream, poked his head through the window. "What's the matter?" he asked. He was sweating, probably from swinging that sword of his around.

"Honey, you have to be more attentive," my mother chided. "Rudy managed to climb up onto the chair. He could have been seriously hurt."

My father seemed much more composed. "Hey, boys will be boys. Kid's got a lot of energy."

This sort of back-and-forth was pretty common with my parents. But

this time, my mother wasn't simply backing down, probably because of how I'd hit my head. "Honey, he isn't even a year old yet. Would it kill you to show some more concern?"

"It's like I said: falling and stumbling and getting bumps and bruises is how kids grow up to be tough. Besides, if he does get hurt, you can just heal him!"

"I'm just worried that he might get hurt so badly that I *can't* heal him."

"He'll be fine," my father assured her.

My mother clutched me more tightly, her face going red.

"You were worried early on about how he wouldn't cry. If he's this much of a little scamp, then he'll be fine," my father continued, and then he leaned in to give my mother a kiss.

All right, you two. Get a room, will ya?

After that, my parents took me into the other room to put me to bed, then headed upstairs to make me a baby brother or sister. I could tell because I could hear the creaking and moaning coming from the second floor. I guess there *was* life outside the internet.

And also…magic?

***

In the wake of all that, I paid extra-close attention to the conversations my parents had with one another and the help. In so doing, I noticed them using a lot of words I wasn't familiar with. Most of these were the names of countries and regions and territories—all clearly proper nouns that I'd never heard before.

I didn't want to jump to conclusions, but by this point, that could only mean one thing: I wasn't on Earth anymore; I was in a different world.

A world of swords and sorcery.

And it occurred to me: if I lived in this world, I could do all those things, too. After all, this was a place of high fantasy, one that didn't obey the same rules of common sense as my past life. I could live as a typical person,

doing the typical things for this world. Where I stumbled, I would get back up, dust myself off, and forge onward.

My former self had died full of regret, died feeling frustrated at his powerlessness and how he'd never accomplished anything. But now I knew all of my missteps. With all the knowledge and experience from my past life, I could finally do it.

I could finally live life *right*.

Chapter 2:
The Creeped-Out Maid

Lilia used to be a royal handmaiden for the Asura Palace harem. In addition to her usual duties as a lady-in-waiting, the role also called for her to act as a guardswoman. She'd been expected to take up arms and come to her master's defense should the need arise. She was devoted to her duties, and carried out her job as handmaiden without flaw or fail.

When it came to her role as a fighter, however, her skill with a sword was merely adequate at best. As a result, Lilia found herself wholly outmatched when an assassin struck at the newborn princess, her opponent's dagger catching her in the leg. The blade had been coated with poison, the sort meant to kill even a member of the royal family, a troublesome toxin that could not be cured by purifying magic.

Thanks to the wound being promptly tended to by Healing magic, and a doctor's attempts at neutralizing the poison, Lilia had managed to survive, but there were lingering aftereffects. They didn't pose an impediment to her daily life, but she could no longer run at any real speed, her gait reduced to a clumsy stagger.

Lilia's life as a warrior had come to an end. The palace promptly discharged her from her position. Lilia understood why perfectly well. It only made sense to lose a job she was no longer able to perform. Although this left her unable to pay even her basic living expenses, given her position in the court, she considered herself lucky not to have been executed in secret. And so, Lilia left the capital.

The mastermind behind the princess's assassination attempt was still to be found. As someone familiar with the palace harem's inner workings, Lilia was well aware that she was a likely target. Or perhaps—had the palace set her free to lure out whoever was behind this plot?

When she'd been brought into the court, she'd been curious why they'd taken on a lowborn woman such as herself. Perhaps they wanted to hire a simple maid who could easily be disposed of.

Whatever the case, for her own safety, Lilia needed to get as far away from the capital as she could. Regardless of whether the palace really was using her as bait, she no longer had any standing orders, no longer had anything holding her back.

She no longer felt any sense of obligation to her old life.

After taking a series of stagecoaches, Lilia arrived at the Fittoa Region, a vast agricultural area on the borders of the kingdom. Apart from the Citadel of Roa, the city where the local lord resided, the region was little more than a grand expanse of wheat fields.

It was here that Lilia decided she'd look for work.

With her leg impaired, a career as a fighter was now off the table. She could conceivably still teach swordsmanship, but she preferred to find work as an attendant— mainly because it paid much better. Here on the outskirts of the kingdom, there were plenty of people who could wield a blade and teach others how to do the same. There were far fewer people who were fully trained royal maids, capable of overseeing the running of an entire household. Even if the pay was lower than she hoped, money was still money.

Being hired as a handmaiden by the lord of Fittoa, or even the high-ranking nobles who served him, was a dicey prospect. The people in those circles had a pipeline right back to the capital. If they found out she was a former handmaiden who'd attended the royal harem, she stood a good chance of being caught up in someone else's political machinations. Lilia wanted no part of that. She'd already had one brush with death, and that was enough for her.

No offense to the princess, but Lilia was going to do what she wanted, someplace far away from the war of succession.

The issue was that less-wealthy families couldn't afford to retain her services. Finding a place that was both safe and still paid decently proved rather difficult.

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After a month of wandering about Fittoa, Lilia finally came across a

job posting that caught her eye. A low-ranking knight in Buena Village was looking for a housekeeper. The posting specified that they were looking for someone with experience in raising children, who could also act as midwife.

Buena Village was a small hamlet on the far edge of the Fittoa Region. It was out in the middle of nowhere, even by middle-of-nowhere standards. The location was inconvenient, but otherwise, it was everything Lilia had been looking for. Her employer being a knight, even a low-ranking one, was another unexpected boon.

It was the employer's name, though, that really got her attention. It was one that Lilia recognized: Paul Greyrat.

Paul was another student of Lilia's former master. One day, back when she had been studying swordplay, the lazy, no-good son of a noble family had turned up at the training hall. Evidently, he'd been disowned by his father in the wake of a fight and would now be studying the sword while sleeping at the hall.

Paul had also studied swordplay at home, so despite having practiced a different style, it wasn't long before his abilities surpassed Lilia's. She was less than amused by that, but chalked it up to her own lack

Paul, on the other hand, positively radiated talent. One day, however, he abruptly left the training hall after causing some kind of big stir for reasons unknown to Lilia. He left with one final declaration: "I'm going to become an adventurer."

The man was like a hurricane.

***

It had been seven years since Lilia had last seen Paul. And not only had he become a knight since then, but now he was also married? Lilia could scarcely believe it. She didn't know what ups and downs he had been through, but if he was still the man she remembered, then he wasn't a bad fellow at all. If he knew she was in trouble, he'd probably help her out.

And if he didn't…well, she'd just have to dredge up some stuff from the past. She had several stories up her sleeve to use as bargaining chips if

she needed to. Having done that bit of mercenary calculus in her mind, Lilia headed for Buena Village.

Paul welcomed Lilia with open arms. His wife, Zenith, was due soon, and the couple was quite frazzled. Lilia had the essential technical know-how from seeing to the birth and rearing of the princess; plus, she was a familiar face that one of them could vouch for. The family was happy to have her aboard.

Also, the pay was better than Lilia had been hoping for. To her, it was like a dream come true.

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And then the child was born.

The birth itself was problem-free, with everything proceeding as it should according to Lilia's training. Even at the junctures where one could typically expect complications, everything went smoothly.

But once he was born, the child did not cry. Lilia broke into a cold sweat. The infant's face was expressionless, his nose and mouth having expelled amniotic fluid, and he made no sound. For a moment, he looked like he might have been stillborn. But when Lilia reached out, she could feel the baby's warm pulse and the movements of his breathing.

Still, he did not cry. Lilia remembered something she'd heard from one of the handmaidens who'd taught her: Children who didn't cry at birth tended to have a host of abnormalities.

At that very instant, however, her thoughts were interrupted.

"Ahh! Waah!"

The baby turned his face toward Lilia, his expression slack, burbling random sounds. Relief washed over Lilia.

She didn't quite know why, but it seemed like things were going to be okay.

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The child was given the name Rudeus, and what an unsettling child he was. He never cried, and never made a fuss. It might just have been that he was physically frail, but that notion was soon proven false. Once Rudeus learned to crawl, he began to make his way anywhere and everywhere around the house—the kitchen, the back door, the supply shed, the cleaning closet, the fireplace, and so on. Sometimes, somehow, he even made his way to the second floor. As soon as anyone took their eyes off him, he was gone.

Regardless, he would inevitably be found within the house. For some reason, Rudeus never ventured outside. He'd look out the windows, but perhaps he was still too scared to leave the house.

Lilia wasn't sure when she developed an instinctual fear of the child. Was it around then, with him slipping away whenever unobserved, always needing to be tracked down?

Rudeus was always smiling. Whether he was in the kitchen staring at vegetables, or at the flickering of a candle in its holder, or at unwashed undergarments, he was always burbling under his breath, chuckling as an unsettling grin rose to his face.

It was the kind of grin that viscerally repulsed Lilia. It reminded her of the smiles she'd gotten from a particular cabinet minister as she made her way between the harem and the royal palace in the past. He was a bald man, his smooth head gleaming in the sunlight and his corpulent belly wobbling as he walked. Rudeus's smile resembled the grin on the minister's face when he eyed Lilia's chest. A smile like that, coming from a mere baby.

What happened when Lilia picked Rudeus up was particularly worrisome. His nostrils flared, the corners of his mouth drew up, and he'd start panting and bury his face against her bosom. His throat would twitch as he made weird, gleeful little giggles.

It was enough to send a chill down Lilia's spine, almost to the point where she wanted to reflexively hurl the boy to the floor. The child showed absolutely no affection. That smile of his was, quite simply, creepy…the same smile as that cabinet minister, who was rumored to have purchased a number of young women as slaves. And this was an infant, smiling like that. Nothing could be more unsettling. Lilia felt she was bodily at risk from a baby.

She could only wonder why this child was so strange.

Was he possessed by something malevolent? Had some curse been laid upon him? When she considered those possibilities, Lilia knew she couldn't stand idly by.

She rushed to the store, spending a small sum on what she needed. Then, when the Greyrats were asleep, and without asking Paul for his permission, she performed a traditional charm of banishment from her homeland.

When Lilia picked Rudeus up the next day, she was certain: It hadn't worked. The baby still had the same unsettling aura. Just the look on his face was enough to give her the creeps.

Zenith herself had often said things like, "When that boy's feeding, he really goes at it, doesn't he?" She was completely unperturbed by the whole thing! Even Paul, a man of weak principles who was something of a womanizer, didn't give off vibes like his son did. The boy didn't even line up with his own parentage.

Lilia had once heard a story in the palace harem. Back when the Asuran prince was still a baby, he'd crawl all around the harem grounds, night after night. It turned out he was possessed by a demon. Not knowing this, one of the attendants picked him up, and he pulled out a knife he'd hidden being his back and killed her by stabbing her in the heart.

It was a frightful story. And Rudeus was just like that. Lilia had no doubts: This was another case of demonic possession. Oh, the boy was calm and placid now, but once the demon within him awoke, he'd make his way through the house while the family was asleep and kill them all one by one.

Lilia had been far, far too hasty. She never should have taken this job. At some point, she knew, she was going to be attacked.

She was, after all, the type to take superstitions quite seriously.

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And so, Lilia lived in fear for the first year or so.

At some point, however, Rudeus's ever-unpredictable behavior changed. Instead of disappearing and reappearing at random, he stayed holed up in Paul's study in one corner of the second floor. Well, perhaps 'study' was a generous word for a simple room that housed a few books.

Rudeus would shut himself in there and not come out. One day, Lilia took a quick peek and there he was, staring fixedly at a book and muttering to himself. What he was saying didn't sound like words. Not words from the common language on the Central Continent, at least.

Besides, he was too young to be talking already, and certainly nobody had taught him to read. Which meant the boy was just looking at the books—not reading them—while making random sounds.

For it to be anything else would just be weird.

Even so, Rudeus sounded like he was speaking with an actual, meaningful cadence for some reason, and it looked like he understood the content of the book he was looking at. *That's so strange*, Lilia thought as she watched secretively through the crack in the door.

And yet, she strangely felt none of her usual revulsion toward him. Ever since the boy had taken to hiding away in the study, his hard-to-define, unsettling oddness had abated a fair bit. Oh, he'd still occasionally laugh or smile creepily, sure, but Lilia didn't get chills whenever she held him anymore. He had stopped burying his face in her chest and panting.

Why *had* she been so unsettled by him, anyway? In recent days, she'd gotten a sense of earnestness and diligence from him that she was loath to interfere with. Lilia spoke with Zenith about it, and she'd apparently gotten the same impression. From that point on, Lilia figured, it was best to leave the boy be.

It was an odd feeling. Leaving an infant alone wasn't something responsible adults did. But now, intelligence glimmered in Rudeus's eyes, in contrast to mere months ago when there had only been a crude dullness. And there was the gleam of a resolute will to go with that intellectual brightness.

What should they do? Nothing in Lilia's meager experience had given her the tools to make the right decision here. *There's no one right way to raise a child*, she'd been told. Had that been from one of the older royal handmaidens? Or perhaps her mother? At least there was nothing too off or

unsettling about the boy now, nothing to fear.

In the end, Lilia decided to leave well enough alone. Any interference might cause the boy to revert to the way he'd been before.

Chapter 3:
A Textbook of Magic

It had been roughly two years since I'd been reincarnated. My legs had finally developed enough that I could walk.

Also, I was finally able to speak this world's language.

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Having decided to give my life an honest shot this time, I first needed to make a plan.

What had I lacked in my previous life? Study, exercise, and technique, that's what.

As a baby, however, there wasn't much I could do. Nothing much beyond burying my face in someone's chest when I was picked up, anyway. Whenever I did that to the maid, she made no attempt to mask the displeasure on her face; clearly, she wasn't a fan of children.

Figuring that exercise was something that could wait, I began learning to read books around the house. The study of language is a crucial thing; almost one hundred percent of Japanese people are literate in their own language, but many of them neglect their study of English or hesitate to interact with people when abroad, so much so that the ability to speak a foreign language is a valued skill. With that in mind, I decided to make this world's writing system my first subject.

There were only five books in our house. I didn't know if that was because books were expensive in this world or because Paul and Zenith weren't big readers. Probably some combination of both. As someone who used to own a collection of several thousand books—even if they *were* all light novels—the situation was tough to come to grips with.

Still, even five books were enough material to learn how to read. The language of this world was close to Japanese, so I was able to pick it up

quickly enough. The written characters were completely different, but the grammar was close to what I was familiar with, which thankfully meant I mostly needed to learn vocabulary, a good chunk of which I'd already been exposed to. My father would read to me, which allowed me to readily pick up words. My new self being better at learning things probably had something to do with it, too.

Once I could read, I found the contents of our books pretty interesting. I'd never had fun studying at any point in my life before, but after some thought, I realized it wasn't that different from hunting down new information about online games. And that wasn't so bad.

Anyway, I wondered if my father knew that his infant son understood the things he was reading. I mean, I was cool with it, but I figured a normal kid my age would throw a temper tantrum or something, so that's just what I did.

These were the five books in our house:

Wandering the World, a reference guide to the various countries of the world and their unique characteristics.

The Ecology and Weaknesses of Fittoan Monsters, which detailed the various monstrous creatures of the Fittoa Region, where they lived, and how to deal with them.

A Textbook of Magic, a wizard's manual of attack spells, ranging from the Beginner to Advanced levels.

The Legend of Perugius, a fairytale about a summoner named Perugius and his companions, who battle a demon and save the world in a classic good-versus-evil epic.

The Three Swordsmen and the Labyrinth, a tale of action and adventure where three master swordsmen of different styles meet and head into the depths of the titular labyrinth.

Those last two were essentially fantasy novels, but the other three made for good study. It was *A Textbook of Magic* that particularly drew my attention. As someone who came from a world without magic, the chance to read actual documentation on it was very relevant to my interests. Reading the book taught me some of the fundamentals.

First, magic came in three types: Attack magic, to do battle against others; Healing magic, to treat the wounds of others; and Summoning magic, to call things forth. And that was it. There seemed to be lots of other things you could do with magic, but according to the textbook, magic was something birthed and developed in battle, and therefore not used much outside of combat or hunting.

Second, you needed magical power in order to use magic—meaning, anyone could use magic so long as they had magical power. There were chiefly two ways of doing this: using one's innate magical power or drawing on the magical power imbued in an object. Either would suffice. There weren't specific examples, but I got the impression that people who did the former were like their own power generators, whereas the second type had to use batteries.

In days of yore, the book said, people had largely used the power within their own bodies for magic. But as research on magic progressed, things got more and more complex. Accordingly, expendable sources of magical energy were developed at an explosive rate. People with strong magical reserves had been able to make do, but those who had little power couldn't cast even basic spells, and so the old magical masters developed ways to draw power from things other than themselves and channel that into magic.

Third, there were two ways of performing magic: incantation and magic circles. This didn't need too much explanation: It simply referred to reciting words or inscribing mystic patterns to cast a spell, respectively. In the old days, magic circles were the chief source of magical power, but in modern times, incantations were far more commonplace. In older times, even the shortest magical incantations took one or two minutes—not exactly something you could use in the heat of battle. But once you'd inscribed a magic circle, you could use it over and over again.

Incantations started becoming the norm when one magician succeeded at greatly shortening them. The simplest such incantations were reduced to around five seconds, and consequently became the only way people utilized Attack magic. For the more complex rituals involved in Summoning magic, where greater efficiency wasn't attainable, magic circles remained the primary means.

Four, the amount of magical power someone had was pretty much determined at birth. In your typical RPG, you gain more MP as you level up, but things didn't work that way in this world. Almost everyone was stuck where they were.

Almost everyone, which implied that some people changed over time. I wondered which group I'd fall into.

The book also said that one's level of magical power was inherited. I knew my mother was able to use Healing magic, so maybe it was all right to have some expectations for myself. Still, I was uneasy. Even if my parents excelled at this sort of thing, I wasn't sure my own genes would be up to the task.

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For the time being, I decided to try my hand at the simplest magic I could. The textbook included both incantations and magic circle spells. Since the former was now mainstream, and I had nothing to draw a magic circle with, I opted to start by studying the incantations. As I understood it, as the scope of a spell got larger, the invocations involved got longer, until you eventually needed to use a magic circle in concert. But if I was starting out with simpler things, I ought to be fine.

The most proficient of wizards, the book said, could cast spells without incanting anything at all—or drastically shorten the incanting time at the very least. I wasn't sure why training allowed people to circumvent the incantation, though. After all, the amount of someone's magical power didn't change; there was no leveling up and no corresponding increase to maximum MP. Maybe with training, the amount of MP spent on the spell decreased? But spending less MP wouldn't make the process less involved, would it?

Well, anyway. Whatever the case, I just needed to give it a shot.

With A Textbook of Magic in my left hand, I held out my right and began to recite the words.

"Let the vast and blessed waters converge where thou wilt and issue forth a single pure stream thereof— Waterball!"

I felt a sensation like blood pooling in my right hand, and then, as if that blood had extruded through my palm, a sphere of water about the size of my fist manifested itself.

"Gah!" I yelped at the strange feeling, and a moment later, the ball of water fell and splattered onto the floor.

It looked like concentration was required in order to maintain a spell.

Concentrate… Concentrate…

I could feel the blood welling in my hand once more. *That's it. There we go. Yeah, this feels right.* Once again, I held out my right hand, forming an image in my head as I recalled how things had gone the last time. I wasn't sure how much magical power I had, but I figured that I couldn't just keep using it over and over.

My plan was to practice one thing at a time until I could pull it off. I would form the image in my mind and play it out, over and over, and try to enact it upon reality. If I tripped up, I would call that image back to mind until I had it perfectly emblazoned within my head.

This was the same way I'd practiced combos in fighting games, back in my previous life. Thanks to that, I almost never screwed up a combo during a real match. Hopefully that meant my training methodology would be sound here, too.

I drew a deep breath. My blood coursed through my body, from my toes to the top of my head, collecting in my right hand, filling it with power. Then, I felt that power pop into being before my palm. Now, bit by bit, so very, very carefully, my thoughts fell in line with the beating of my heart.

Waterball, ball of water, water, wetness, wet…wet panties…

Whoops. That kinda just slipped in there. Getting back to it, then…

I buckled down, and set my mind to it: *water, water water waterwaterwater—*

"Hah!" I cried out in pure reflex as my hand shot out before me, fingers spread. In that instant, the ball of water came into being. "Whoa, what?"

Splish.

In my moment of shock, the ball of water plopped to the floor.

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"Wait." I hadn't shouted an invocation, had I? But then… why? All I'd done was put myself into the same mental space as the last time I'd tried the spell. Did incantation not matter much when reproducing the flow of magical power?

Was using magic without chanting really that easy? That had to be a high-level skill, right? "If it's that easy, what's the point of the incantation at all?" I mused aloud. Here I was, a complete beginner, and I'd successfully pulled off a spell without any words at all. I'd simply focused the magical energy of my body in the front of my mind and then willed it to take shape.

That's all it was. Which implied that the incantation wasn't really necessary after all. Anyone could do what I'd just done.

Hmm. Perhaps the incantation was an activation trigger for the spell, where uttering the words would create the effect without having to focus on the energy coursing through your body. That had to be what it was. Sort of like the difference between manual and automatic transmissions in a car, where you could still take manual control if you really wanted to.

"Using an incantation allows magical effects to trigger automatically."

This had some huge advantages. First, it made for easy teaching. Rather than needing a convoluted explanation about feeling the blood coursing through your veins converging and all that, casting a spell by chanting words was both easier to explain and easier to understand. And then, as one's studies progressed, the idea of the incantation being an indispensable part of the process would naturally take root.

The second advantage was that incantations were easy to use. Attack magic, by its very nature, was something that needed to be done in the heat of battle. It was a lot faster to rattle off a chant than it was to close your eyes and stand there humming as you tried to concentrate. Also, in the heat of the moment, it was far easier to blurt something out than it was to go through a series of minute gestures.

"But maybe some people do find the first option easier…"

I flipped through the book, but there was nothing about casting spells without incantation. That was odd. What I'd just done hadn't been all that difficult.

Maybe I had some kind of special talent, but I doubted it was something that others weren't able to tap into at all, I reasoned. A magician typically used incantations from when they were a beginner to when they became a master. After casting thousands or even tens of thousands of spells, the body grew accustomed to the incanting; even if they did try to cast a spell wordlessly, they wouldn't know how. Therefore, it wasn't something that was ordinarily done, and hence the book said nothing of it.

"Yeah, that does make sense!" After all, I was hardly ordinary myself. That was cool, right? Sorta like having a sneaky trick up my sleeves. "*Did she just activate the Crime Catalyst without an Oratorio?" "But that catalyst is usually just supposed to open up the channel!"*

Oh, *now* I sure was interested!

Okay, okay. No getting ahead of myself. I needed to calm down and keep my cool. My past self had gotten all caught up in this feeling, too, and we know how he turned out: someone who puffed himself up because he was better with computers than the average person, then got way too cocky and failed hard at life.

I needed to keep a level head. Restrain myself. The important thing here was not to think of myself as being better than other people. I was just a beginner. A n00b. I was like a novice bowler who just happened to land a strike on my first toss through dumb luck. Beginner's luck—that's all it was. I needed to buckle down and focus on studying instead of mistaking this for some sort of innate knack.

All right. I had it: I'd first attempt a spell by chanting the incantation, then practice single-mindedly by mimicking how it felt without using the incantation.

"Okay, let's try this again," I said, holding my right hand out in front of me. My arm felt vaguely heavy, and my shoulder like I had something big weighing it down. This was exhaustion. Had I been concentrating too hard?

No, that couldn't be right. I was a (self-styled) low-end MMO master who could go without sleep for six days when grinding. No way had this paltry mental exertion drained me that much.

"Am I out of MP, then?" What the heck? If someone's magical power was determined at birth, did that mean I only had enough MP to cast two

Waterball spells? That seemed way too low. Or maybe since this was my first time, I just had less magical power to work with? No, that didn't make sense.

I tried once more, just to make sure, and I wound up passing out.

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"Honestly, Rudy," my mother said, "when you get tired, you need to go to the toilet first and then get to bed."

I woke to find I'd fallen asleep with the book in hand, and wet myself in the meantime. Dammit. I couldn't believe I'd wet myself at my age. That was humiliating.

Dammit. How could I—

Wait. I was only two years old, right? Wetting myself was still forgivable at that age, yeah?

So, it seemed my magical power had been too low after all. That deflated my mood some. Still, even if all I could muster was two Waterballs, what mattered was how I used them, I supposed. Maybe I should concentrate on conjuring them more quickly?

Ugh.

***

The next day, I still felt fine after conjuring my fourth Waterball. It was after the fifth that I started to feel tired.

"What the hell?"

Given my experience the day before, I knew that casting another would cause me to black out, so I decided to stop.

And then it hit me: That put my limit at six Waterballs—twice what I'd managed yesterday. I stared into the bucket that held five spells' worth of water and wondered why I'd been able to do twice as much as the day before. Had I been more tired because it was my first time? Had the spells consumed

more MP because it was my first time casting them?

I'd cast all my spells today without incantations, so I doubted it had anything to do with that. I had no idea. Perhaps my abilities would grow further the next day.

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The following day, my Waterball count increased significantly. Now I was up to eleven.

What was the deal? It felt like the more I used the spell, the more I was able to use it. If I was right, I would be able to pull off twenty-one the next day.

The day after that, just to be on the safe side, I only cast five before calling it a day.

The day after that, though, I managed twenty-six. It looked like I was right—using the spell more frequently did allow me to cast it more.

I'd been lied to! What was all that stuff about a person's magical reserves being set at birth? People were just assigning limitations to talent when it didn't have any. How dare adults tell children where their limits were?! "Guess I can't take what this book says at face value, then," I muttered. The stuff written in the book seemed to take the perspective that there were limits on what a person could achieve.

Or maybe it was talking about how things worked after training one's skills? Perhaps the book was saying that there was an upper limit on magical power that no further amount of effort and training could get you past.

No. It was still too soon to come to that conclusion. For now, that would just be a hypothesis. Maybe it was like…maybe someone's power increased as they grew, or something. And using magic during childhood might rapidly cause that upper limit to increase. Which meant I alone had a special quality that—no. I'd already said I wouldn't consider myself special.

In my former world, they said that exercising while you were growing let your abilities develop more rapidly; conversely, after you were done growing, improvement only went so far even with intense effort. We might

be talking about magic in this world, but the realities of how the human body worked couldn't be that different. The principle was still the same.

Which meant there was only one thing for me to do: continue honing my skills as best I could while I was still growing up.

***

The next day, I decided that I would continue to push my magic to its limits daily, which increased how much I could use it. As I could recreate the right feeling, casting a spell without an incantation was easy enough. I hoped to master the Beginner spells for each branch of magic before long.

By "Beginner spells," I meant the most basic spells that could be used for offense. This included spells like Waterball and Fireball, as well as other even more entry-level spells.

Spells were broken up into seven levels of difficulty: Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced, Saint, King, Imperial, and Divine. Typically, magicians with training could use the Advanced spells from the discipline of magic they focused on, but could only use Beginner or Intermediate spells from the other schools. Once someone was able to cast spells of a rank higher than Advanced, they were acknowledged as a Fire Saint or Water Saint or whatever, depending on their chosen branch.

Saint-tier magic. I kinda hoped to be that good someday. My magic textbook, however, only included fire, water, wind, and earth spells up to the Advanced level. Where was I ever going to learn Saint-tier magic, then?

No—I shouldn't dwell on that so much, I decided. In RPG M*ker, if you start out by making all your strongest monsters first, odds are it's just going to be frustrating. You need to start with the low-level stuff, like slimes.

Although I personally never managed to complete anything in that game, even when I did start with slimes.

***

The Beginner-level water spells listed in the tome were as follows:

Waterball: hurls a spherical projectile of water.

Water Shield: causes a spout of water to erupt from the ground, forming a wall.

Water Arrow: launches a bolt of water roughly twenty centimeters long at a target.

Ice Smash: strikes an opponent with a mound of ice.

Ice Blade: creates a sword made out of ice.

These were all Beginner spells, but the amount of magical power they required was very different, taking somewhere roughly between twice and twenty times as much as the basic Waterball spell. For my fundamentals, I stuck to water magic; if I tried fire magic, I might accidentally burn the house down.

Speaking of fire magic, the amount of magical energy you put into a spell affected the temperature of the results, so it stood to reason that Advanced ice spells worked the same way. But despite the fact that the book claimed both Waterball and Water Arrow were supposed to fly through the air, I wasn't able to get them to do that for some reason. I wasn't sure why. Was I getting some part of the spell wrong? I couldn't really tell.

A Textbook of Magic did say something about the size and speed of spells. Maybe, after conjuring my projectile, I needed to imbue it with additional magical energy in order to control its movement?

I decided to give it a try. "Huh?" I murmured as my sphere of water grew larger. "Whoa!"

And then: *Splash*!

"Oh…"

I'd dropped it on the floor again.

After that, I experimented with making the Waterball bigger and smaller. I tried creating two Waterballs at once, then attempted to change their sizes separately.

I discovered a few things, but still didn't manage to make any of my spells fly.

Fire and wind spells remained floating in the air, since they weren't subject to gravity, but they fizzled out and disappeared after a while. I tried using the wind to move the hovering orbs of flame, but I got the impression something wasn't right with that.

Hmm…

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Two months later, thanks to a mistake in my studies, I managed to get a Waterball to fly. As a result, it finally became clear why incantations were a key part of the process.

All incantations followed a similar process: spell genesis, size determination, speed determination, and then activation. The caster was the one who regulated those two intermediary steps before completing the spell.

First, the caster called forth the shape of the spell they wished to use. Next, there was a window of time where they could add additional magical power to impact its size. Third, after the size had been determined, there was another window for the caster to adjust the spell's velocity. Finally, the caster released the finished spell from their hand.

That was how it worked…or at least how I understood it. The trick was to add magical power in two discrete stages after the initial casting. There was an order to it. Unless you did something to adjust the spell's size, you couldn't move on to adjusting its speed. It made sense that if you tried to change the spell's speed first, you'd only make it bigger and nothing more.

In that vein, when using a spell without incanting, the caster had to hold that entire process in their head. That sounded like an inconvenience, but it did shorten the time it took to infuse the spell with power to affect its shape and speed. This allowed for a spell to be cast a few seconds quicker.

I was also able to tweak the process of creating the initial spell. For instance, this wasn't listed in the book, but it was possible to freeze a Waterball and turn it into an Iceball—that sort of thing. If I kept up my studies, maybe I'd be able to pull off the Kaiser Phoenix (heh!), or something like that.

Lots of things could work; it all just depended on what ideas came to mind. This was starting to get fun!

Still, fundamentals were important. I needed to build up my magical potential before I started experimenting.

I had two items on my training regimen now: increasing my magical reserves and making silent spellcasting second nature. Setting goals that were too grand upfront would only lead to disappointment. The trick was to start small.

Okay, then. It was time to buckle down and do it. Every day from that point on, I practiced my Beginner-tier spells until I was on the verge of passing out from exhaustion.

Chapter 4:
Master

I turned three years old.

I'd recently, finally, learned my parents' names. My father was Paul Greyrat. My mother was Zenith Greyrat. And my name was Rudeus Greyrat, the firstborn son of the Greyrat family.

My parents didn't refer to each other by their first names, and they called me "Rudy" for short, so it took some time to learn what all of our actual, formal names were.

***

"My, Rudy really does love that book, doesn't he?" Zenith said with a smile as I puttered about with *A Textbook of Magic* in hand, as I usually did.

My parents didn't seem bothered by the way I always lugged the book around. Even when I was eating, I'd keep it tucked under my arm. I did, however, make a point never to read it in front of them—not because I wanted to keep my talents a secret, but simply because I wasn't sure what this world's views on magic were. Back in my old world, for instance, witch hunts had been a thing—you know, where they'd burn suspected magicians alive for heresy.

Of course, considering that my magic textbook was something of a practical guide, magic probably wasn't considered heresy in this world, but that didn't mean people might not still take a dim view of it. Maybe magic was something you only did when you were grown. If nothing else, magicians risked blacking out if they used it too much; people might think it could stunt a child's growth.

With all that in mind, I decided to keep my magical aptitude a secret from my family. As it was, I'd had to practice casting spells out the window, so there was a chance I'd be found out anyway. I didn't have much choice in

that, though. Not if I wanted to test how quickly I could launch my spells.

Our maid (whose name was Lilia, apparently) would occasionally give me stern looks, but my parents remained as blasé as ever, so I was pretty sure I was safe. If people tried to stop me, I wouldn't fight it, but I didn't want to squander my childhood while I still had it. I needed to flex my talents now, before they set and became too rigid. Now was the time for me to make the most of things.

***

Then, one afternoon, my secret magic training came to an end.

My magical reserves had grown a decent amount, so I went through the incantation for an Intermediate-tier spell rather casually. The Water Cannon: Size 1, Speed 0. I figured that, as usual, the water would pool into my bucket. Maybe it would flow over, but surely not by too much.

So, I cast the spell…and launched forth an impressive amount of water that blasted a massive hole in the wall. I stood there, dumbstruck, watching as water dripped from the wooden edges of that hole. I was too flummoxed to think of what to do. Given the size of the hole, people would know it had been made by magical means.

There was nothing I could do to change that now. I always had been quick to give up.

Paul was the first to rush into the room. "What happened?" he cried out. "Whoa!" His jaw dropped at the hole in the wall. "What the hell? Wait—Rudy! Are you okay?"

Paul was a good guy. It was obvious that I was the one who'd done this, but all he cared about was that I was all right. He went on his guard, carefully checking the surroundings.

"Was there a monster?" he muttered under his breath. "No, not around these parts…"

"Oh, goodness," said Zenith as she came into the room. She was always a lot calmer than my dad. She looked first at the shattered wall, then at the pool of water on the floor. "Huh?" Her gaze shot to my magic textbook

and fixed on the page it was opened to.

My mother looked back and forth between me and the book, then crouched in front of me. She looked me in the eye, her mouth curled into a warm smile.

The smile didn't reach her eyes, though. It was pretty scary.

I wanted to look away, but I tried as hard as I could to keep my gaze locked with Zenith's. If I'd learned anything from my time as a jobless freeloader, it was that getting petulant and defiant when you'd done something bad only made the situation worse. So I wasn't going to take my eyes off hers, no matter what. Right now, I needed to show sincerity. And the simplest way to do that was to make eye contact—at least you would look sincere, regardless of how you felt.

"Rudy, did you speak some of the words from that book out loud?" Zenith asked.

"I'm sorry," I replied with a tiny nod. A straightforward apology was best when you'd done something wrong. I was the only one who could have done this, so lying about it would only damage my parents' trust in me.

Back in my old life, I told casual lie after casual lie until no one trusted me. I wasn't going to make that mistake again.

"Sorry?" Paul asked. "That was an Intermediate-tier sp—"

"Oh, honey, did you hear that?!" Zenith interrupted, practically squeaking. "Oh, I just knew our boy was a genius!" She balled her hands into tiny fists and hopped around in ecstasy.

Well, she sure was in a good mood. I guess that meant the apology was accepted?

Zenith was clearly thrilled by this development, but Paul still appeared at a loss. "Wait, hold on," he said, looking at me. "We haven't even taught you how to read yet, or—"

"We'll have to hire a tutor for him right away! Oh, he's going to grow up to be an amazing magician, I just know it!"

Zenith's reaction to my ability to use magic was one of barely contained glee. Evidently, my fears that children shouldn't use magic were unfounded.

Meanwhile, Lilia had casually and wordlessly begun to clean up. Either she already knew I could use magic, or she'd had her suspicions. Since this ability didn't appear to be so bad, it seemed she hadn't cared that much. Or maybe she just wanted to see my parents happy.

"Honey, let's head into Roa tomorrow and post a job for a tutor!" Zenith said. "We need to make sure Rudy can hone his talents!"

Zenith was over the moon, rambling on and on about how her son was a genius for suddenly demonstrating a knack for magic. I couldn't tell whether she was just being a proud mother or if being able to use an Intermediate-level spell was considered that impressive. It had to be the former, right? She hadn't seen me practicing any of my magic, so her saying that she "just knew" I was a genius meant she'd already decided that for herself, without any basis.

No, that wasn't exactly true. She clearly had some kind of intuition. I did talk to myself a lot. Even when I was reading, I'd mutter words or phrases that I liked aloud. Ever since I came to this world, I'd been subvocalizing things while reading; at first it was all in Japanese, but after picking up the local tongue, I subconsciously started using that instead. When Zenith heard me utter words, she would pipe up to explain what they meant. This was also how I learned a lot of this world's proper nouns, but that's not really relevant here.

Nobody had said anything as I went about teaching myself this world's language. Nobody taught me the words I was reading, either. From my parents' perspective, they were seeing their child read when he hadn't been taught, as well as speaking the contents of books aloud.

Of course they'd think I was a genius.

I mean, if it were my kid, that's what I'd think.

That's how it went in my past life, after my younger brother was born. He was faster to grow up—faster in picking things up compared to me or my older brothers, including speaking and walking. My parents were the sort of easygoing folks who'd cheekily say, "Oh, I wonder if he's a genius," even when it was nothing that impressive.

I had to keep in mind that, while I might have been a jobless high-school dropout, I also had the mental age of a person in his mid-thirties. I

could do this!

"Honey, we *have* to get him a home tutor!" Zenith said. "I'm sure we'll be able to find a great magic instructor in Roa!" Apparently, parents were the same no matter where you were: Any time a kid shows some inkling of special talent, it's straight to making sure they get the proper, special education for their gifts. In my old life, my parents heaped praise on my younger brother for being such a genius and gave him a whole bunch of stuff to learn.

Paul was less enthusiastic about Zenith's suggestion to find me a home tutor for magic. "Hold up, now. Didn't you promise that if we had a boy, we'd raise him to be a knight?" So, a girl would be a magician, but a boy would be a knight? They must have agreed to that before I was born.

"But he can already use Intermediate magic at his age!" Zenith rebutted. "With the right training, he'd be an amazing magician!"

"A promise is a promise, though!"

"Don't you talk to me about promises! You break promises all the time!"

"We're not talking about me right now!"

And so my parents got into a bit of a spat, while Lilia continued calmly going about her duties. The argument dragged on for a bit, until, as Lilia finished cleaning up, she said with a sigh, "What if he studies magic in the morning and practices swordplay in the afternoons?"

That suggestion put the argument to rest, and my silly parents decided on their kid's studies without bothering to take his feelings into account.

Well, no big deal. I did promise to give it my all in this new life, after all.

***

And so it was decided that a home tutor should be hired for me.

I gathered that the position of personal instructor to a young noble was a well-paying one. Paul was one of the few knights in the area, which made

him a fairly low-ranking noble himself, so I wondered whether he could offer competitive pay. We were out in the sticks on the far border of the kingdom, though, and out on the frontier, high-level talent (especially for something like a magician) was in short supply. If we put in a request to something like a Mages' Guild or Adventurers' Guild, would anyone even respond?

My parents also seemed worried by that prospect, but they apparently found someone promptly, because my lessons were going to start the next day.

And since there was no inn in our village, my teacher would be living with us.

My parents were fairly certain that my teacher would be some retired adventurer. Young people wouldn't come all this way to the boonies, and there was no shortage of jobs for royal magicians back in the capital. As I understood it, in this world, only Advanced-level magicians taught the arcane arts. So, whoever we got would at least be an Intermediate- or Advanced-level adventurer, possibly higher.

In my mind's eye, I pictured a middle-aged or elderly fellow with many years of diligent study under his belt, complete with the long beard that was requisite for such wizards.

"I'm Roxy. It's a pleasure to meet you."

My expectations were quite off the mark. The person who showed up was a young girl, maybe of junior-high age.

She was clad in brown, wizardly robes, her blue hair styled into braids, her posture prim and proper. Her white skin looked untouched by the sun, and her eyes were somewhat sleepy. Her expression didn't exactly radiate sociability, and despite her lack of glasses, she looked like the sort of girl who liked to hole up in a library with her nose in a book.

In one hand, she carried a bag, and in the other, she held a staff befitting a magician. The family came to greet her together, my mother carrying me in her arms.

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"…"

"…"

My parents looked her over, at a total loss for words. No wonder, really. This couldn't have been what they were expecting at all. When hiring someone to be a home tutor, you'd figure you'd get someone a bit further on in years. And instead, here was this little thing.

With all video games I'd played, the idea of a magician loli wasn't terribly unusual to me.

Underage. Scornful eyes. Socially awkward. That right there was the trifecta.

She was perfect.

I wanted her to be my bride.

"Oh, uh, are—are you the home tutor?" Zenith finally asked.

"Aren't you a little, uh…" Paul managed.

My parents were fumbling with their words, so I decided to be direct and finish my father's sentence. "You're little."

"Hey, you're sure one to talk," Roxy snapped back. She sure seemed to be touchy about the subject. And I wasn't even talking about her breasts.

Roxy let out a sigh. "So, where's this student of mine?" she asked, looking around.

"Oh, that would be our boy right here," Zenith replied, bouncing me slightly in her arms.

I gave Roxy a cheeky wink. Her eyes went wide, and she sighed once more. "Ugh, this happens sometimes," she muttered under her breath. "Kid shows signs of growing up a little fast and the damn parents get it into their heads that he's got a special talent."

Hey! I heard that, Roxy!

I mean, I totally agreed with her, but still.

"You say something?" Paul asked.

"Oh, nothing," she replied. "I'm just not sure that your son would be

able to understand the principles of magic."

"Oh, don't you worry," Zenith said, brimming with motherly pride. "Our little Rudy here is brilliant!"

Yet again, Roxy sighed. "All right, then. I suppose I'll just have to do what I can." She sounded like she'd already decided it was futile.

And so, that was the first day of taking classes with Roxy in the morning and practicing swordplay with Paul in the afternoon.

***

"Okay, so this magic textbook here… Actually. Before we get to that, how about we see how much magic you can use, Rudy?"

Roxy had taken me into the yard for our first lesson. I gathered that magic was something typically practiced outside. Heck, I'd already learned firsthand what could happen when you let loose with magic inside the house.

People don't want to go around blowing holes in walls or anything.

"First, I'll demonstrate. *Let the vast and blessed waters converge where thou wilt and issue forth a single pure stream thereof—Waterball!*" As Roxy chanted her incantation, an orb of water about the size of a basketball formed in her palm. Then, she hurtled it at high speed at one of the trees in our yard.

The Waterball snapped the tree in half as if it were a mere twig and drenched the fence behind it. That must've been a Size 3, Speed 4, if I had to guess.

"Well?" Roxy asked. "What do you think?"

"My mom has always loved that tree and spends a lot of time caring for it, so I think she's gonna be pretty angry."

"Huh? Really?!"

"Without a doubt." One time, when Paul was swinging his sword around, he'd accidentally lopped off one of the tree's branches, but Zenith hadn't been terribly mad about it.

“Oh, that’s not good,” Roxy stammered, rushing over to the tree in a panic. “I have to do something about this.”

With a grunt, she hefted the fallen trunk back into place. Then, red in the face and straining with exertion, she began to chant. “Nngh… *Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again—Healing!”*

Slowly and surely, the trunk of the tree worked its way back into its original position. Okay, credit where credit is due: That was pretty amazing. “Whew!” Roxy breathed.

“You can use Healing magic, too, Miss?!”

“Hm? Oh, yes. Anything up through Intermediate-tier spells.”

“Oh, wow! That’s amazing!”

“Oh, not at all! With the proper training, anyone could do this.” Roxy’s tone was somewhat curt, but the corners of her mouth softened, and her nose wiggled proudly.

Yeah, she was happy, all right. All it took was laying on some praise. Man, she was easy to please.

“All right, Rudy. You give it a try.”

“Okay!” I held out my hand and—

Crap. It had been nearly a year since I’d performed

Waterball by using the incantation, and I couldn’t remember how it went. Roxy had just said it, though.

Hmm. Let’s see…

“Um, how does it go again?”

“Let the vast and blessed waters converge where thou wilt and issue forth a single pure stream thereof,” Roxy said matter-of-factly. She apparently figured this was well within my capabilities.

She’d said it so matter-of-factly, though, that I couldn’t remember it after hearing it just the once. *“Let the vast and blessed waters…*” I began, before failing to recall the rest, so I cut the incantation short. I conjured a ball of water just a little smaller and a just a little slower than Roxy had; after all, if I outdid her, she might get all pouty. Hey, I like to be nice to younger girls.

The basketball-sized Waterball struck its mark with a splash, the tree creaking and cracking as it fell over. Roxy fixed her gaze on this sight, her expression stiffening.

"You cut your incantation off, didn't you?" she asked.

"Yeah." Uh-oh. Was I in trouble?

That's right: The magic textbook didn't say anything about casting spells without incantations. I'd done it as if it wasn't a big deal, but maybe this was some cultural taboo? Or maybe she was angry that I'd pulled off something that should have required a lot more training? Hopefully, she'd just admonish me for being sloppy with my chanting or something.

"Do you usually cut your incantations short like that?" she asked.

I wasn't sure how to answer that, and after some wavering, decided to be honest. "I usually, uh…don't use them at all." After all, I was going to be studying under her, so she'd figure it out eventually.

"Not at all?!" Roxy's eyes were wide with shock and disbelief as she looked down at me. She quickly regained her composure, however. "Ah, yes, now I get it. That makes sense. Are you feeling tired right now, then?"

"A little, but I'm all right."

"I see. Well, the size and force of your Waterball was just fine."

"Thank you."

Finally, Roxy cracked a smile—a real one. And then she muttered to herself. "Maybe it is worth training this kid."

Again, I can still hear you.

"Okay, let's move on to the next spell," Roxy said excitedly, flipping through the magic book some more.

"Aaaahh!" From behind us, a scream split the air. Zenith had come outside to see how things were doing. She dropped the beverage-laden tray she'd been carrying and brought both hands to her mouth as she looked over at the mangled, toppled tree. Sadness filled her face.

A moment later, that sadness was replaced with livid anger. She stomped over to Roxy, getting right in her face.

"Miss Roxy, honestly! Could you please not use my trees for

experimentation?"

"Hey! Rudy's the one who did it!"

"If Rudy did it, it was because you let him!"

The whites of Roxy's eyes grew, her body tensing as if a thunderclap had just gone off. Then she hung her head. Hey, that's what you get for trying to shift the blame onto a three-year-old. "No, you're absolutely right," she murmured.

"Please see to it that this doesn't happen again, young lady!"

"It won't, ma'am. I'm so sorry."

Zenith went over to the tree and restored it to its former beauty with her Healing magic before heading back into the house.

"Well, I sure messed this up pretty quickly," Roxy mused.

"Miss…"

"Heh. I'm guessing I'll be let go tomorrow." She sat down on the ground, drawing little circles in the dirt.

Wow. She really could not take even the slightest punishment, could she? I stood next to her and patted her on the shoulder, but said nothing.

"Rudy?"

I wasn't sure what to do after patting her on the shoulder. I hadn't really struck up a conversation with anyone in close to twenty years, so I couldn't find the words to comfort her. I honestly didn't know what the right thing to say in this sort of situation was.

No. I just needed to calm down and think. What would the protagonist of an adult dating sim say to comfort someone at a time like this?

Okay. I was pretty sure it would go something like this.

"You didn't fail here, Miss."

"Rudy…?"

"You just earned some more experience, that's all."

Roxy was taken aback. "Yes, you're…you're right.

Thank you."

"Uh-huh. So, could you please continue with our lesson?"

And so, right from day one, I formed a little bond with Roxy.

***

Afternoons were spent practicing swordplay with Paul.

We didn't have a wooden practice sword suitable for a toddler of my stature, so our focus was on physical training: running, push-ups, sit-ups, that sort of thing. According to Paul, getting my body used to moving was the first priority. On the days he was too busy to train with me, he told me to keep up with my fundamentals.

Guess dads are like that in every world. I just had to grin and bear it.

A young child doesn't have the stamina to spend an entire afternoon exercising, so we'd finish up around mid-afternoon. That being the case, I decided to spend my time between then and dinner working on spells.

Adjusting the size of a spell increased the amount of magical power needed to fuel it. There was the default amount of power a spell took to cast if you put no conscious effort into it when the incantation finished, and making a spell larger than that consumed an accordingly greater amount of magical power. Sort of like the law of conservation of mass.

Curiously, however, making a spell *smaller* also consumed more magical power. I wasn't quite sure of the principle at work there, but creating a ball of water the size of a fist took less magical energy than creating one the size of a raindrop. It was weird.

I asked Roxy about that, but she just said, "Yeah, that's how it goes."

Apparently, that hadn't been explained yet.

I didn't know the mechanisms by which magic worked, but through practice, getting a handle on the methods wasn't so bad. My magical reserves had grown to the point that I wouldn't burn through them unless I cast large spells. If my goal had been simply to use up my magical power, then I could've just keep unleashing the strongest spells I had until I was drained.

After a while, though, I wanted to move on to actual applications of

magic, so I decided to focus on practicing more precise spellcrafting. I wanted to make my effects smaller, narrower in scope, more complex: for instance, creating sculptures out of ice, making my fingertip glow with fire to write on planks of wood, taking dirt from the backyard and separating it into its constituent components, locking and unlocking doors, and so on.

Reshaping something that was already hardy and solid was obviously more difficult. Working to reshape something as hard as metal, for instance, cost more magical power. Working your magic on something smaller, on something more intricate, or attempting to work with both speed and precision at once expended vastly more power as well. The concentration and effort it took felt like trying to throw a fastball and thread the eye of a needle at the same time.

I also experimented with using spells from different magical branches at the same time. This took more than three times the magical expenditure than using two spells of the same branch did. In other words, trying to be quick and precise with two spells of differing schools simultaneously was a great way to blow through all your magical reserves at once.

My training went on like this, day after day, until I reached a point where I couldn't see the bottom of where my reserves tapped out even after spending more than half the day using magic. I got the sense that I'd built them up to sufficient levels. Especially for a slacker like I used to be, I thought.

But I was quick to caution myself. The body goes soft when one slacks off from their physical training. For all I knew, magic could be the same, and now that I'd built up my reserves, I wanted to keep training to make sure they stayed that way.

***

One night, while practicing some magic, I heard the lascivious sounds of a creaking bedframe and lurid moaning coming from somewhere. Well, not "somewhere," really—it was coming from Paul and Zenith's bedroom. And my, were the sounds vigorous. In the not-too-distant future, I might be welcoming a little brother or sister.

Hopefully a sister. No more younger brothers for me. In my mind's eye, I could still see my past life's younger brother winding up for a full swing with his bat, smashing my beloved PC to bits. I didn't need a younger brother.

But a kid sister would be nice.

"Oh, man…"

In my old life, I'd just stay put and bang on either the wall or the floor to shut people up whenever I was disturbed by sounds like these. Thanks to that, my older sister stopped bringing guys home entirely. Man, that brought back memories.

At the same time, I'd always thought people who did that sort of thing were blights on the world. It reminded me of the people who used to bully me, sneering down at me from a position out of my reach, filling me with an anger I had no outlet for. Even if the perpetrator was somehow brought low to my level, he'd still look at me and ask, "What, you're still here?"

It was the worst.

But things weren't like that anymore. Maybe because I was now a child, or because it was my parents going at it, or just because I was more focused on my future, hearing them doing their business actually brightened my mood. I could tell roughly what they were getting up to just from the sounds.

It seemed that Paul was pretty good in bed, too. Even though Zenith was out of breath, I heard him say, "Oh, I'm just getting warmed up," before he went back to thrusting. He sounded like the main character from a pretty rapey adult dating sim, boundless virility and all.

Hmm. As Paul's son, maybe I'd inherited some of that sexual prowess? And one day, I would awaken to my powers, find my heroine, and make my way into the pink.

That sort of thing excited me at first, but it had recently grown stale, and I'd casually make my way down the hall to the toilet with the sounds of creaking resonating through the walls. Also, the creaking and moaning would stop as soon as I approached their room, which was pretty damn amusing.

Tonight was the same. I headed for the toilet, wondering whether I

should let them know that their son, now capable of walking, was there. Maybe this time I should try saying something. Maybe something like, "Mooom? Daaad? What are you doin' naked?"

It'd be fun hearing what excuses they came up with.

Heheheh.

With that in mind, I slipped out of my room as quietly as I could—except someone was had already beaten me to the punch. The blue-haired girl was hunched in the dark hallway, peeking into the bedroom through the gap in the door. Her cheeks were flushed bright red, and her breathing had sunk to a low, rough panting, her gaze locked on the inside of the room.

One of her hands was inside her robes, moving about rather suggestively. I quietly crept back to my own room. Roxy was in the grip of adolescence, after all, and I had the decency to pretend that I hadn't seen anything.

Or, well, something like that. I definitely liked what I had seen, anyway.

***

Four months later, I was able to cast Intermediate-tier spells. At that point, Roxy began to give me classroom-style lessons in the evenings.

Uh, that probably makes it sound sexier than it was. This was about studying, first and foremost. She was a good teacher. She was fussy about sticking to a particular curriculum, but she'd also ramp up the content of our lessons based on how well I understood things. She was good at intuitively responding to her student. She had a book that acted as a supplement to *Textbook*, from which she'd ask me questions; if I got one right, we'd move on to the next one, and if I didn't know something, she'd very politely explain it to me.

It might not sound like much, but I could feel my world opening up.

In my old life, our family hired a personal tutor when my older brother was taking his entrance exams. One time, on a whim, I listened in on one of their classes, but it didn't seem like it was anything different from what was

taught at school. By comparison, Roxy's lessons were much easier to understand and a lot more fun. Her teaching style resonated with me, and got quick results.

Of course, it didn't hurt that my teacher was a junior-high-aged girl at the budding edge of sexual maturity. That was kind of an awesome situation. In my old life, I could have gotten off to that mental image in three pumps.

***

"Miss Roxy, how come there are only spells for things to be used in combat?" I asked abruptly.

"Oh, well, that's not really the case, actually," Roxy replied. "Let's see. What's the best way to explain it? Okay, first off, it's said that magic was originally created by the High Elves."

Whoa, elves?! Aha! So they do exist!

I could picture them, with their blond hair and greenish garb, bows strapped across their backs, tentacles keeping them all bound up.

Ahem. Okay, gotta calm down there.

Based on the ideographic characters used to write the word for "elf," it seemed they had long ears.

"Miss Roxy, what are elves?" I asked.

"Allow me to explain. Elves are a race of people who currently live in the northern part of the Millis Continent."

According to Roxy, long before even the Great Human-Demon War, when the world was engulfed in the unceasing spiral of battle and chaos, the High Elves, in order to fight their enemies, entreated with the spirits of the forests to control the wind and the earth. And thus, the first magic spells were born.

"Wow, so there's an entire history to this and everything?" I asked.

"Of course there is!" Roxy huffed, rebuking me with a nod. "Modern magic takes its form from humans mimicking the spells the elves used in battle and reworking them. Humans are good at that sort of thing, after all."

"We are?"

"Why, yes. It's nearly always humans who push for innovation. There are only combat spells because people have mostly only used magic in battle; for anything else, you can use something close at hand instead of relying on magic," Roxy explained.

"Something close at hand? What do you mean?"

"Well, for instance, if you need a light source, you can just use a candle or a lantern, right?"

Ah, I got it. So, we were in that kind of setting, where tools and devices were simpler to use than magic. That made enough sense.

Granted, silent casting would be easier still.

"Moreover," Roxy continued, "not all magic is used for battle. For instance, Summoning magic lets you call forth powerful fiends or spirits."

"Summoning magic! Do you think you'd be able to teach me that soon?"

"I'm afraid not. I can't use it myself," Roxy replied. "But to get back to my earlier point, magical implements also exist."

Magical implements? I was pretty sure I had an idea of what she meant, but that was still a little vague. "Could you explain those?" I asked.

"Magical implements are devices that have special magical effects. They've got a magic circle inscribed somewhere within them, so even if someone isn't a magician, they can still make use of them. Some of them utilize vast amounts of magical power, though."

Okay, so that was pretty much in line with what I'd been imagining. Still, it was too bad about Roxy not being able to use Summoning magic. I understood the principles of Attack magic and Healing magic well enough, but I didn't know how Summoning magic actually worked.

But hey, I'd been introduced to some new terms I hadn't heard before: Great Human-Demon War, fiends, spirits. I understood them well enough on the surface, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to ask more.

"Miss Roxy, what's the difference between a fiend and a monster?"

"Fiends and monsters aren't terribly different from one another."

She explained that monsters were the result of sudden mutations in normal animals. If they were lucky enough to grow in numbers, establish themselves as a new species, and develop intellect over the generations, they became fiends. But apparently, many creatures that possessed intelligence but still attacked humans were referred to as monsters. There were also cases of fiends growing more savage and brutal over the generations, reverting back into monsters.

So, there wasn't a wholly concrete delineation between the two. In general, though, monsters attacked humans and fiends did not.

"So then, demons are just more evolved version of fiends?" I asked.

"No, demons are completely different. The name 'demon' comes from a time long ago when the races of men and demons battled one another."

"Is that the Great Human-Demon War you mentioned earlier?"

"That's right," Roxy said. "The first conflict happened around seven thousand years ago."

"Wow, that's so long ago it's almost dizzying to think about." This world evidently had quite a long history.

"Oh, it's not all that long ago. Humans and demons were still at war with one another as recently as four hundred years ago. It started seven thousand years ago, and the two sides have been in conflict off and on ever since."

Four hundred years sounded pretty long ago as is, but seven thousand years of ongoing fighting? Humans and demons must really not get along.

"Ah, okay, I get it," I said. "So then, what are demons?"

"Well, it's a little hard to actually define," Roxy said.

The simplest way to put it, according to her, was that "demons" included whoever fought on the demons' side in the most recent conflict. But this, too, had its exceptions.

"I'm a demon myself, actually," she said.

"Oh. You—you are?"

I had a demon for a home tutor. Which I supposed meant that there wasn't any conflict going on right now. Giving peace a chance really was the

way to go, huh?

"That's right," Roxy said. "More formally put, I'm one of the Migurd, from the Biegoya Region of the Demon Continent. You must have noticed your parents' surprise when they first saw me, right, Rudy?"

"I figured that was because you're little."

"I am not little," Roxy huffed. That was clearly a sore spot with her. "They were surprised by the color of my hair."

"Your hair?" I thought it was a very pretty shade of blue, personally.

"They say that, for the demonic races, the closer our hair is to green, the more savage we tend to be. Depending on the lighting, my hair can look pretty green, too."

Green, huh? Was that this world's danger color, then?

Roxy's hair was a striking sky-blue color, and she twirled a finger in her bangs as she explained herself. Her mannerisms were adorable.

Back in Japan, blue hair was the sort of thing I'd associate with punks or older women. When I saw people like that, I always thought it was unusual —but there was nothing unusual or off-putting about Roxy's blue locks. If anything, I thought her slightly sleepy-looking eyes helped complete the picture. She looked like she could be the first character whose route I'd try to complete in an adult dating sim.

"I think your hair is pretty," I said.

"Oh, thank you very much. But that's the sort of thing you should say to a girl you like after you've grown up."

I didn't miss my opening. "I like you, Miss!" I couldn't help it; hitting on cute girls is what I do.

"I see. Well, in another ten or fifteen years, if your feelings haven't changed, please feel free to tell me that again." She'd pretty cleanly rebuffed me, but I still caught the happy look that crossed her face.

I wasn't sure how much the 'Nice Guy' skills I'd honed by playing hentai games would help me in this world, but the answer clearly wasn't "nowhere." Jokes and lines that were old and played-out back in Japan might well be unique and passionate ways to win over someone's heart here.

Okay, yeah, I'm not sure what I was trying to get at, either. The point is that Roxy was cute and naughty and I wanted to push her buttons. The considerable age gap between us was definitely an issue, though. Maybe something to think about for the future.

"To get back to the subject at hand," Roxy said, "the idea that more brightly colored hair signifies danger is nothing but a superstition."

"Oh. It is?" Now I felt silly for having taken the whole "danger color" thing seriously.

"Yes. During the war four hundred years ago, the Superd, a green-haired demonic race from the Babynos Region, went on a brutal rampage. That's where the association comes from; the color of someone's hair doesn't actually have anything to do with that."

"A brutal rampage, you said?"

"Indeed. After only a decade and change of war, they became feared by friend and foe alike, becoming as violent as they were despised. They were so dangerous that, after the war, persecution drove them almost completely from the Demon Continent."

Their own allies pushed them away after the war? Wow.

"People really hate them that much?" I asked.

"They do."

"What did they do that was so bad?"

"Well, I can only tell you what I've heard. Things like attacking allied demon settlements and slaughtering the women and children, or wiping out all of their foes on the battlefield and then turning to do the same to their allies. When I was a kid, I'd hear stories like that all the time. 'Don't stay up too late, or the Superd will come and eat you!' That sort of thing."

It almost sounded like she was talking about the Putaway Man, the boogeyman from that old anime.

Roxy continued. "The Migurd and Superd peoples are closely related, and I've heard we used to get treated much the same as they were." She paused to make sure she had my attention. "I imagine your parents will probably tell you something like this soon enough, but if you ever see someone with emerald-green hair and what looks like a red jewel set in their

forehead, make sure you don't go anywhere near them. And if interacting with one is unavoidable, whatever you do, make sure you don't make them mad."

Emerald-green hair and a red jewel in the forehead? She must have been describing the Superd to me.

"What'll happen if I make them mad?"

"You might get your entire family killed."

"You said emerald green, with a red jewel in their forehead, right?"

"That's right. The thing on their forehead is their third eye, which allows them to see the flow of magic."

"Are all the Superd women?" I asked.

"Er, no. There are men, too, like you'd expect."

"If they do something with the jewel on their head does it turn blue or anything like that?"

Roxy tilted her head in bafflement. "Um, no? At least, not that I know of?"

Well, I was happy I'd gotten to ask what I wanted. "It sounds like they stand out and are pretty easy to recognize, at least," I said.

"That's right. If you ever see one, just act casual, like you've got something else to do, and get out of there. If you bolt all of a sudden, you might provoke them."

Spotting some punk and making a run for it just invited the chase, huh? Yeah, I had some experience with that. "So, if I do have to talk to one, just speak very politely and I should be okay?"

"As long as you don't say anything blatantly degrading, then there ought to be no problem; however, there are many differences in what's commonly accepted in human culture versus demon culture, so you might not know what words will trigger an outburst. It's safest to avoid being obliquely sarcastic and that sort of thing."

Hmm. These guys must have some incredible tempers. Roxy had said they'd been victims of oppression, but it sounded like these fears had some basis. I mean, if their anger was scary enough to warn other people to stay

away from them—yikes.

If I got killed, I doubted I'd be lucky enough to get a third shot at life, so I figured it was best to do everything I could to steer clear. These Superd were really bad news.

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Roughly another year went by. My magic lessons were proceeding apace. I could now use Advanced-tier spells from all different branches of magic.

All without using incantations, too, of course.

Compared to ordinary training, Advanced magic was like picking one's nose. By which I mean there were a lot of ranged attacks and they felt pretty awkward to use. Like, what was I going to do with the ability to make it rain over a wide area?

But then I remembered how, after a prolonged drought, Roxy had made it rain over the wheat fields, to the great joy of the villagers. I'd been at home at the time, so this was all stuff I'd heard from Paul.

Evidently, Roxy had handled multiple requests from the townsfolk and had been solving their problems. I could almost hear it now:

"I was tilling the soil and struck a big rock buried in the ground! Help me, Roxyemon!"

"Just leave it to me!"

"Whoa! What kinda magic is that?"

"I used water magic to dampen the soil around the rock and then used it in concert with earth magic to change it into mud!"

"Wow, that's amazing! The rock is just sinking away!"

"Heeheehee!"

I was guessing that was (probably) how it went.

"I knew you were the sort of person who liked helping people, Miss Roxy!" I said.

“It’s not exactly that. I’m doing this to earn money on the side.”

“You get paid for doing stuff like that?”

“Of course.”

My first instinct was to write her off as greedy, but the townspeople seemed to accept her terms. They’d never had anyone who could do that sort of thing for them before, and they deeply appreciated Roxy for it. I guessed this was what they called give and take.

I’d been thinking about this the wrong way. The idea of helping someone out of a bind without asking for anything in return was a very Japanese one. It was normal to get compensated for that sort of thing. It just made sense.

Granted, being the shut-in I was in my past life, not only did I not help anyone else out of a bad situation, I was the bad situation for the rest of my family.

Hahaha…

***

One day, out of the blue, I decided to ask Roxy,

“Would it be better if I called you ‘Master’ instead of just ‘Miss’?”

Roxy scrunched up her face awkwardly. “No, probably best not to. I’m sure you’ll easily surpass me soon enough.”

I had enough talent to be better than Roxy? It was enough to make me blush.

“After all, it’d be weird to call someone whose powers were inferior to yours ‘Master,’” Roxy added.

“I don’t think it’s that weird.”

“Well, it’d be weird for me. I’d never outlive the shame of having someone who’s clearly better than me referring to me as ‘Master.’”

Ah. Was that what this was all about, then? “Are you saying that because you got stronger than your own master, Miss Roxy?”

“Listen, Rudy: A master is someone who says they have nothing else they can teach you, but still butts in with their advice on each and every thing you do.”

“You wouldn’t do that, though, Miss Roxy.”

“I might.”

“Even if you did, I’d be honored.” Roxy always looked pretty satisfied with herself whenever she advised me on things; I probably had quite the grin on my own face when plying her with compliments.

“Oh, no. If I became that resentful of my own student’s talents, there’s no telling what I might blurt out.”

“Like what sorta things?”

“Stuff like how I’m just a filthy demon, or how you’re just some country hick.”

Wow, did Roxy seriously just say that to me? I felt sort of bad for her. Being discriminated against wasn’t great, after all. But I guess that’s what you get when there’s a hierarchy to your relationship with someone.

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “Just act like you’re better than me!”

“I’m not going to act all haughty and superior just because I’m older! I’m just not comfortable having a master-pupil relationship with such an imbalance of talent!”

She shot me down real quick; it looked like my bond with my master had taken a turn for the worse. In my mind, I decided that I’d still think of her as my master regardless. After all, she was a girl who still had some traces of youth and could properly teach me whatever I couldn’t learn by reading.

Chapter 5:
Swords and Sorcery

I was now five.

We had a small party to celebrate my birthday. Birthdays weren't a yearly celebration in these lands. At ages five, ten, and fifteen, it was customary for one's family to give gifts. You were considered an adult at fifteen, so that made a lot of sense.

Paul gifted me with a pair of swords for my birthday. One was a real sword, too long and heavy for a five-year-old to wield; the other was a short practice sword. The real sword had been properly tempered and bore a fine edge. It definitely wasn't something suitable for a little kid.

"Son, a man must always carry a sword within his heart. In order to protect what's important to you, you…" My father started a long, rambling stream of advice, and I just smiled and nodded.

His spiel had a friendly and energetic air to it, but in the end, even Zenith chided him for going on too long. Admonished, he smiled and wrapped up with, "Just remember to keep it put away when you don't need it."

The man clearly wanted me to have the self-awareness and preparation to be able to carry a sword around.

Zenith gave me a book. "Because you love books so much," she said, as she handed it to me.

It was a botanical encyclopedia. "Oh, wow," I whispered instinctively. Books in this world were quite expensive. They had the means to make paper, but didn't yet have printing, so everything had to be handwritten.

The encyclopedia was a thick volume, complete with helpful illustrations and easy-to-understand descriptions. I could only imagine how much it must have cost.

"Thank you, Mother. I wanted something just like this!"

With that, Zenith drew me into a tight hug.

Roxy gifted me with a wand. It was a stick, roughly thirty centimeters long, set with a small red stone at the tip.

“I crafted it yesterday,” Roxy said. “It completely slipped my mind, since you’ve been using magic this whole time. A master is supposed to create a rod or wand for a pupil who can use elementary magic. My apologies for forgetting.”

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As much as she didn't like being called "Master," Roxy sure seemed reluctant to buck the traditions of the role.

"Thank you, Master," I said. "I'll take good care of it."

Roxy grimaced.

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The following day, I began actually training with the sword, focusing on practice swings and fundamental forms. We had a wooden practice dummy in our yard that I used to practice my forms and my strikes. My father helped me with my footwork, my balance, and the like. It felt really good, getting into the real meat and potatoes of swordplay.

Knowing how to wield a sword was crucial in this world. Even the heroes who appeared in books mostly wielded swords. Some used axes or hammers, but they were in a distinct minority. No one used spears, because the despised Superds made use of tridents; it was commonly thought that the spear was a weapon of evil. When a spear appeared in a story, it was usually wielded by the wickedest of villains, the kind who would devour friend and foe alike, who would slaughter indiscriminately.

Given that background, the art of the blade was far more advanced in this world than it was in my old one. A master swordsman could cleave a boulder in a single stroke, or unleash a flash of the blade to strike a distant foe.

Paul had enough skill to accomplish the first one. I wanted to know the principles behind it, so he demonstrated it several times while praising and encouraging me. He probably felt pretty good having his young, Advanced-magic-using son clapping and cheering for him.

Still, no matter how many times he showed me the trick, I couldn't tell how he did it. So I asked for an explanation.

"Take a step forward, like *hngh*, and then *fwam*!"

"Like this?"

"No, you dolt! That was a step forward like *hmph*, and then a wham! I

said *hngh* and then *fwam*! Stay lighter on your feet!"

And so it went.

This was just conjecture on my part, but it seemed to me that, in this world, magic was woven into the art of swordplay. It was visibly different from the flashy magical effects created by spellcraft, and instead worked by improving one's physical prowess and strengthening the metal of the sword itself. How else would it be possible to move at such blinding speeds or slice a huge rock in two?

Paul wasn't using magic consciously. That was why he couldn't explain how he did what he did. It meant that once I was able to reproduce what he did, I'd be able to use magic to give myself a physical boost. I had to stick with it.

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In this world, there were three primary schools of swordplay.

First was the Sword God Style. This style maintained that the best defense was a good offense and focused on high-speed moves with the goal of striking one's opponent first—ideally finishing the fight with a single blow. If the opponent was still standing, the practitioner would continue to strike and feint back until they were victorious. If I had to compare it to something from my old world, the closest thing would be Satsuma Jigen-ryu.

Second was the Water God Style, the polar opposite of Sword God: It was a defensive form, focused on warding off strikes and then countering. Its core tenet was one of nonaggressive defense, which didn't allow the practitioner many openings for attack, but a true master would be able to unleash a counterstrike to any attack coming their way—and I do mean any attack, including projectiles and magical attacks. Given its focus on protection, this was the sword style of choice for royal guards and nobles.

Last was the North God Style. This was less a sword form than a general battle strategy. It didn't focus on specific moves, but allowed the user to adapt to different situations on the fly. According to Paul, this ad hoc approach involved a lot of cheap tricks and clever ploys, but mastering the

style yielded truly fantastical results. The image I got was of a sword-wielding version of Jackie Chan. Because this style taught one to treat injuries and allowed for fighting even with imperfect posture, it was the favored school for mercenaries and adventurers.

Together, these were known as the Three Great Styles, and each had adherents the world over. It was said that a swordsman who wanted to push their skill to the ultimate limit would knock on the door of each school and continue training until they were dead—though few people actually did this. The "quick" way to attain martial strength was to pick one of these styles to train in until proficient.

In reality, while Paul chiefly practiced Sword God Style, there was a smattering of Water God and North God elements included in there. It seemed that most people didn't head out into the world deciding to exclusively adhere to one style or another.

As with magic, swordsmanship was broken into the following levels of skill: Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced, Saint, King, Imperial, and Divine. The "God" part of each style's name came from the epithets given to the founders of its school; the first swordsman of the Water God School, for example, was able to use Divine-level water spells. Having a Divine rank in both sword expertise and magical competence made for an obscenely powerful warrior.

Also, it was typical when referring to swordsmen to address them as "Water God" or "Water Saint" or whatever their level of proficiency was. For magicians, it was tradition to add "level" to that descriptor. Roxy, for example, was a "Water Saint-tier Magician."

***

Paul decided that I would learn both the Sword God Style and Water God Style: the former to get a good handle on offense and the latter for defense.

"But Father," I asked, "based on what you've told me, it sounds like North God Style is the most balanced of the three."

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s not even a style—it’s just using a sword to fight with, really.”

“Oh, I see.” North God Style was clearly the odd one out of the Three Great Styles. Either that, or Paul just wasn’t fond of it personally. Though he was rather good at the style for someone who didn’t like it.

“You’ve got a knack for magic, Rudy, but it doesn’t hurt to learn the sword as well. You want to be a magician who can fend off an attack from someone who can use Sword God Style.”

“So, you’re saying I’d be, like, a mage knight?”

“Hm? No, a mage knight is a swordsman who can also use magic. You’re the opposite of that.”

I wasn’t sure what the difference was, really. Whether you started as a warrior who picked up magic or as a magician who did it the other way ’round, a mage knight still knew how to use both, right? At any rate, if I worked on my swordplay, I could adapt it to my use of magic.

The issue was that Paul couldn’t teach me how to magically boost my physical prowess because he wasn’t consciously aware of how he did it. I either needed to acquire the ability myself or attain it via the right physical training. I needed to figure out the principle at work.

For a moment, Paul was lost in thought, an uneasy expression on his face. “You don’t like swordplay, do you?” he finally asked.

Was he saying that just because I had an aptitude for magic? He must have been worried that I didn’t want to train in the sword. Don’t get me wrong: I had no problem practicing how to use a sword. I just preferred time alone with Roxy studying magic over getting dirty and sweaty with another guy in the yard.

I was an indoors sort of guy.

But hey, personal preferences couldn’t get in the way of things. I’d decided to put my best effort into my second shot at life, and that meant trying my best at magic and the sword alike.

“No,” I said, “I want to be as good at swordplay as I am at magic.”

Paul flushed with pride and nodded happily as he brought his wooden practice sword to bear. “All right, then. Let’s get to it. Come at me!”

He was a simple man.

Swords and sorcery. I wasn't sure which I'd ultimately come to rely on. Honestly, I'd be cool with it either way. But it was also my duty to establish a good bond with my parents while I was young.

"All right, Father!" I called out.

In my past life, I'd been a burden to my parents till the day they died. If I'd been nicer to them, maybe my siblings wouldn't have kicked me out of the house.

I needed to be better to my parents this time around.

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While I was taking my first steps in sword training, my magical studies were taking on a more technical and practical bent.

"What would happen if you cast Waterfall, Heat Island, and Icicle Field in that order?" Roxy asked.

"You'd create mist."

"Correct. And how would you go about clearing up that mist?"

"Umm…cast Heat Island again and heat up the ground?"

"Exactly. Now, please demonstrate, if you would."

By using spells from different schools in succession, it was possible to create other phenomena. This was known as Combined Magic. *A Textbook of Magic* included a spell for making rain, but had nothing about creating mist. Therefore, magicians had to use spells from multiple schools in sequence. This allowed for the reproduction of various natural phenomena.

This was a world without microscopes. They probably hadn't discovered all of the principles that governed the natural world. Combined Magic contained all the creative genius of the great wizards of old.

Well, I didn't need to bother with that kind of nonsense. If I wanted to create a cloud, I'd just use a spell that made rain fall and cast it as close to the ground as possible. The idea of intentionally creating a natural phenomenon

was simple enough to understand. With a little outside-the-box thinking, you could do all sorts of things.

For me, personally, that was a bit easier said than done.

"Magic can do anything, right?" I asked Roxy.

"It can't do anything," Roxy admonished. "You mustn't rely on it too much. Just keep a cool, level head and hone your abilities to do what you're able, and what you should." Despite her words, my head was filled with images of things like railguns and active camouflage. "Moreover, if you go around proclaiming how you can do anything, you're going to get hit with something you can't."

"Are you speaking from experience, Miss Roxy?"

"I am, yes."

Well, this was a lesson I needed to take to heart, then. I didn't want problems I couldn't deal with getting dropped in my lap.

"Do magicians get hit with a lot of problems in their line of work?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. There aren't that many users of Advanced magic around, after all."

They said that maybe only one in twenty people could learn to fight. And to find a magician among them had the same twenty-to-one odds. So, four-hundred-to-one odds of finding a capable magician, then.

Magicians themselves weren't particularly rare, though.

"Only one in a hundred magicians are able to properly learn the art and graduate from magic school, becoming Advanced-tier magicians," Roxy said.

That meant that Advanced-tier magicians were a one-in-forty-thousand deal. If we included Beginner and Intermediate spells in the mix, the number of things Combined Magic could do increased dramatically—which in turn made it so popular. To be a magic tutor around these parts, one needed to be at the Advanced tier or higher.

Steep requirements, but they yielded powerful results.

"So, there are magic schools?" I asked.

"Yes. There are magic schools all over the place in the major

kingdoms."

I'd assumed as much, but still—magic school? Huh. Should I give that a try? Move on to my schoolboy arc?

"Though the largest," Roxy continued, "is the Ranoa University of Magic."

Whoa, they even had universities for that sort of thing?

"Is this university different from the other magic schools?" I asked.

"They have excellent facilities and a faculty to match. You'd have access to more modern and advanced courses there than at other schools, I'd imagine."

"Did you go to the University of Magic, too, Miss Roxy?"

"I did. Magic schools have very strict rules and regulations, so the University of Magic was the only school I could get into."

It sounded like these other Ranoan magic schools would allow a child of noble birth like myself to attend, but could deny entry on the basis of someone not being human. Discrimination against demons was lessening in modern days, but strong prejudices still lingered.

"The Ranoa University of Magic doesn't lean on any strange regulations or misplaced pride. As long as you adhere to proper theory, they won't kick you out for being on the eccentric side, and they accept students of all different races. The different races even carry out individual research on their own particular kind of spellcraft. If you're interested in taking your magical education further, Rudy, I can highly recommend the University of Magic."

Way to talk up her own alma mater. I was getting ahead of myself anyway. If I enrolled in university at age five, I'd probably get the crap bullied out of me.

"I think it's a little early to make that sort of decision," I murmured.

"Indeed. You could also fulfil Sir Paul's hopes of you becoming a swordsman or a knight. And there are people who've attained the title of knight who have also attended the University of Magic. Don't think your choice is an exclusive one between swords or sorcery. You could always become a mage knight or something, after all."

“Okay.”

Well then. It sounded like Roxy felt the opposite of Paul, worried that I didn’t like magic enough. Lately, my magical reserves had been increasing, and I’d come to understand much of the theory behind the art. As a result, I was frequently restless and distracted during our classes. And besides, I’d been forced to take classes starting at age three. She probably figured I’d grown sick of it over the last two years.

Paul saw in me a talent for magic; Roxy saw in me a passion for the sword. With these differing ideas, they were pointing me toward a middle path.

“We’re talking about stuff well into the future, right?” I said.

“For you, Rudy, yes.” Roxy flashed a forlorn smile. “Pretty soon, however, I’ll run out of things I can teach you. Your graduation is coming up very soon, so this sort of conversation isn’t too premature.”

Wait—graduation?

Chapter 6:
Reasons for Respect

I had not left home since I'd come to this world.

After a point, that became intentional on my part.

I was afraid.

When I stepped into the yard and looked at the world beyond, memories came flooding back to me: memories of that day. The ache in my side. The chill of the rain. Regret. Despair. The pain of being hit by that truck.

It was as vivid as if it had been yesterday. My legs trembled.

I was able to look out the window. I was able to step into our yard. But I could not bring myself to go farther.

And I knew why.

This serene pastoral landscape that stretched out before me could turn into hell in an instant. As peaceful as the scenery looked, it would never accept me.

In my past life, while sitting around the house, frustrated and horny, I'd fantasize about Japan suddenly getting caught up in a war. And then a hot girl showing up one day, needing a place to stay. I knew that if that happened, I'd rise to the challenge.

That fantasy was my escape from reality. I'd dreamt it so many times. In those dreams, I wasn't larger than life or anything—just a normal guy. Just a normal guy, doing normal things, living a normal life for himself.

But then, I'd wake up from that dream. I feared that if I took one step away from my home now, I'd wake up from this dream, too. I'd wake up, and find myself right back in that moment of crushing despair, battered by the waves of my many regrets.

No. This was no dream. It felt far too real. Maybe if you'd told me it was a VRMMORPG, but—no. This is reality, I told myself. I knew it was. Reality, and not a dream.

And yet, I still couldn't bring myself to take that one step away from home.

No matter how I tried to reassure myself, no matter how much I promised myself aloud, my body would not obey.

I wanted to cry.

***

The graduation ceremony was to take place outside the village, Roxy informed me.

I protested meekly. "Outside?"

"Yes, just outside the village. I've already got the horse prepared."

"Can't we do it inside the house?"

"No, we can't."

"We can't, huh?" I was at a loss. Intellectually, I knew that someday I'd need to venture into the world beyond. My body refused to comply, though. It still remembered too much from before.

It remembered my old life. Getting beaten up by punks. Being laughed at uproariously. Experiencing tremendous heartbreak. Having no choice *but* to become a shut-in.

"Why, what's the matter?" Roxy asked.

"Um, well, it's just… there might be monsters or something out there."

"Oh, we certainly won't run into any of them around these parts, long as we don't get too close to the forests. Even if we do, they'll be weak enough that I can take care of them. Heck, you could probably handle them yourself." Roxy frowned dubiously at all my hemming and hawing about not wanting to leave. "Ah, that's right, I remember hearing that you've never left home, have you, Rudy?"

"Er… no."

"Is it because you're afraid of the horse?"

"N-no, I'm…not that scared of horses." I actually liked horses, really. I'd played Derby Stallion and everything.

"Hehe. Ah, so that's all it is," Roxy said. "I guess you *do* act your age sometimes."

She totally had the wrong idea, but I couldn't tell her I was afraid of leaving the house. That'd be even more humiliating than saying I was afraid of horses. And I still had my sense of pride—my minuscule, out-of-touch-with-reality sense of pride.

Really, all I wanted was to not have a little girl like her make fun of me.

I still didn't move. "Guess I don't have any other choice, then," Roxy said. "Hyup!" With that, she picked me up and slung me right over her shoulder.

"Bwuh?!" I balked.

"Once you get on the horse, your fears will all go away,

I promise."

I didn't struggle. Part of me was conflicted about what was happening, but another part of me felt like I should just accept being bodily whisked away.

Roxy hoisted me atop the horse and clambered up behind me. She took the reins, tugged at them, and the horse cantered off, leaving the house behind.

This was the first time I'd gone farther than my own yard. Roxy slowly guided us through the village. From time to time, villagers would shoot sharp, unabashed stares in my direction.

Oh, please, no, I thought. Those looks were as scary as ever—especially that glint of sneering superiority I knew too well. Surely, they wouldn't come up and address me with a snide, condescending tone…right? They didn't even know me. How could they? The only people who knew me in this entire world were the ones in that tiny little house.

So why were they looking at me? Quit staring at me, I grumbled

inwardly. Get back to work.

But—no. It wasn't me they were staring at.

It was Roxy.

And some of the townsfolk, I noticed, were bowing to her. And then it hit me: Roxy had made a name for herself in the village, even with the sizeable prejudice against demons in this kingdom. And we were out in the countryside, so those attitudes were even more pronounced. In the span of two years, Roxy had become someone that people here were willing to bow to.

With that realization, I sensed the trustworthy presence Roxy had become. She knew the way, and clearly knew the people we were passing by. If anyone did try saying something to me, I was sure she'd step in.

Man, how did the girl who spied on my parents' bedroom antics manage to become someone of such high esteem? The tension ebbed from my body at that thought.

"Caravaggio's in a good mood," Roxy said. "He seems happy to have you riding him, Rudy."

Caravaggio was the horse's name. I had no idea how to read a horse's mood, though. "Oh, okay," I said vaguely, resting against Roxy, her modest chest pressing against the back of my head. It felt nice.

Just what had I been so afraid of? Why would anyone in this quiet village want to mock me for anything?

Roxy's voice broke me out of my headspace. "Are you still afraid?"

I shook my head. The looks from the villagers no longer frightened me at all. "No, I'm okay."

"See? What did I tell you?"

Now that I'd found some composure, I could fully take in of my surroundings. Fields spread out as far as I could see, with houses dotted here and there. It definitely had the feel of a farming village.

Much farther in the distance were quite a few more houses. If they'd been more closely packed together, I'd think it was a town. All it needed was a windmill for it to look like Switzerland or something.

Actually, didn't they have water mills, too?

Now that I'd relaxed, I noticed how quiet things were. Things were never this quiet when Roxy and I were together. But then, we'd never really been alone like this together, either. The silence wasn't bad, really; it was just a tad awkward.

So, I decided to break it. "Miss Roxy, what do they harvest from these fields?"

"It's mostly Asuran wheat, which is used to make bread. Probably some Vatirus flowers and some vegetables as well. In the capital, Vatirus flowers are processed into perfume. The rest is the sort of stuff you're used to seeing on your table at meals."

"Oh, yeah, I see some peppers! You can't eat those, can you, Miss Roxy?"

"It's not that I can't eat them, I'm just not terribly fond of them."

I continued asking questions like that. Today, Roxy said, would be my final exam—which would mean the end of her role as my tutor. And knowing how impatient Roxy could be, she might leave my home as early as tomorrow. If that was the case, today was our last chance to spend time together. I figured I should talk to her while I still could.

Sadly, I couldn't find the right topic of conversation, so I ended up just asking more questions about my village.

According to Roxy, we lived in Buena Village, which was located in the Fittoa Region, in the northeastern part of the Asura Kingdom. At present, there were over thirty households here, working the farmland. My father, Paul, was a knight who had been deployed to the village. His job was to watch over the townsfolk to ensure they were carrying out their work properly, adjudicate any disputes, and protect the village from monster attacks. In short, he was basically a publicly sanctioned bodyguard.

That being said, the young men in the village also took turns guarding it, so Paul spent most of his afternoons at home after he made his morning rounds. Ours was a pretty peaceful village, leaving him with little work to do.

As Roxy filled me in on these details, the wheat fields grew scant. I stopped asking her questions, and the silence resumed for a while. The rest of

our journey would take roughly another hour.

Soon, the fields of wheat were completely gone, leaving us to travel through empty grassland.

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We continued our way across the plains, bound for the flat horizon.

No—I could faintly see mountains in the distance. If nothing else, this was something you couldn't see in Japan. It reminded me of a picture of the Mongolian steppes in a geography textbook or something.

"Right here should do nicely," Roxy said, bringing the horse to a stop next to a solitary tree. She dismounted and tied the reins to the tree.

Then, she picked me up and helped me down, putting us face to face. "I'm going to cast the Water Saint-tier attack spell Cumulonimbus," she said. "It creates thunder, and causes torrential rain to come down in a large area."

"All right."

"Please follow what I do and attempt to cast the spell yourself."

I was going to be using Water Saint-tier magic. Now I got it: This was my final examination. Roxy was going to use the most powerful spell she had in her repertoire, and if I was able to use it as well, that would mean she'd taught me all she could.

"For demonstration purposes, I'm going to dismiss the spell after a minute. If you can keep the rain falling for…at least one hour, let's say, I'll consider that a pass."

"Did we come out here where there aren't any people because this involves secret teachings?" I asked.

"No, we came here because the spell might hurt people or cause damage to the crops."

Wow. Rain so powerful it could damage crops? This sounded incredible.

"Now then." Roxy raised both her hands skyward. *"Oh, spirits of the*

magnificent waters, I beseech the Prince of Thunder! Grant me my wish, bless me with thy savagery, and reveal to this insignificant servant a glimpse of thy power! Let fear strike the heart of man as thy divine hammer strikes its anvil and cover the land with water! Come, oh rain, and wash everything away in thy flood of destruction—Cumulonimbus!"

She chanted steadily, slowly, and purposefully. It took her just over a minute to complete her incantation.

A moment later, our surroundings grew dark. For several seconds, there was nothing—then, a pelting rain began to fall. A terrific wind roared, accompanied by black clouds that flickered with lightning. Amidst the pouring sheets of rain, the sky began to rumble, and purple light shot through the clouds. With each new flash, the lightning increased in power. It was almost as if the light itself was taking on a palpable weight, growing with a swell and ready to come right—

—down.

The lightning struck the tree next to us. My eardrums rang, and my vision went painfully white.

Roxy let out a yelp of alarm at the near miss. A mere moment later, the clouds scattered, the rain and thunder promptly letting up. "Oh, no," Roxy muttered as she rushed over to the tree, her face pale.

When my vision returned, I saw that the horse had collapsed, smoke rising from its body. Roxy set her hands on the horse's body and quickly began to chant. *"Oh, goddess of motherly affection, close up this one's wounds and restore the vigor to his body—X-Healing!"*

Roxy's chant had been flustered, but before long, the horse came to. It couldn't have been that close to death, then: An Intermediate-tier Healing spell like that couldn't restore the dead to life.

The horse looked alarmed, and sweat had beaded on Roxy's forehead. "Whew! That was a close one!"

Yeah, I'd say it was a close one, all right. That was my family's only horse! Paul dutifully tended to it every day and would occasionally take it out on long rides, a bright smile on his face. It didn't have a particularly impressive pedigree or anything, but Paul and that horse had been through a lot over the years. It wasn't a stretch to say that, after Zenith, Paul loved that

horse more than anything. That's how important it was.

Of course, having spent the last two years living with us, Roxy was well aware of that, too. I'd seen her more than once, looking entranced as she spied on Paul and the horse, only to then shrink away.

"Could we, ah, could we please keep this a secret?" Roxy said, tears in her eyes.

She was a klutz. Near misses and scrapes like this were a common occurrence with her. Still, she gave things her all. I knew she stayed up late every night to plan lessons for me, and I knew that she tried her hardest to put on an air of dignity so people wouldn't write her off for her age.

I liked that about her. If it weren't for our age difference, I'd want to marry her.

"You don't need to worry," I said. "I won't tell my father."

Her lip quivered. "Please don't."

I mean, I would have liked to be within at least a decade of her, age-wise.

Despite being on the edge of tears, Roxy quickly shook her head, slapped her own cheeks, and regained her composure. "All right, Rudy. Go ahead and give it a try. I'll be sure to keep Caravaggio safe."

The horse still looked frightened, ready to bolt at any moment, but Roxy stepped in front of him, blocking his path with her tiny body. She certainly couldn't physically overpower a horse, but bit by bit, the nervous creature grew more docile. Roxy held her position and muttered an incantation under her breath.

Both of them were engulfed by a wall of earth, which proceeded to grow into an earthen dome not unlike an igloo. This was the Advanced-tier earth spell Earth Fortress. That ought to suffice to keep them safe from the thunderstorm.

All right. It was my time to do this. I was gonna be so amazing that it'd blow Roxy's mind.

How did the incantation go again? Ah, yes. *"Oh, spirits of the magnificent waters, I beseech the Prince of Thunder! Grant me my wish, bless me with thy savagery, and reveal to this insignificant servant a glimpse*

of thy power! Let fear strike the heart of man as thy divine hammer strikes its anvil and cover the land with water! Come, oh rain, and wash everything away in thy flood of destruction—Cumulonimbus!"

I got the words out in a single breath, and the clouds began to billow and swell.

Now I understood the nature of the Cumulonimbus spell: In addition to conjuring clouds overhead, you simultaneously had to handle a complex series of motions to turn them into thunderclouds—or something to that effect. You had to continually funnel magic into the spell or the clouds would stop moving and dissipate. Leaving the magic aside, it was going to suck having to stand here with both hands raised for over an hour.

Wait, no. Hold on. Magicians were creative. They wouldn't need to hold a pose like this for an hour to pull things off. I had to remember: This was a test. I wasn't supposed to stand still for an hour; after creating the clouds, I needed to use some form of Combined Magic to keep the spell maintained.

This was the moment of truth. I needed to call upon all I'd learned.

"Okay, I think I remember seeing this on TV once. So, when clouds are still in the process of forming…"

Some of the clouds Roxy had created earlier still lingered. If I remembered right, I could conjure a horizontal whirlwind of air and warm the air beneath it to create an updraft. And then, if I cooled the air above the updraft, it would pick up speed and…

In doing all that, I wound up burning through half my magical reserves. I'd done what I could, though. Now I just had to see if it would last an hour. Satisfied, I headed back to the dome Roxy had created, rain pouring down on me as thunder rumbled in the skies above.

Roxy sat against one side of the dome, the horse's reins clutched in her hands. Upon seeing me, she gave a little nod. "This dome will disappear in about an hour," she said, "so we'll be fine, assuming it doesn't go away before then."

"Okay."

"Don't worry. Caravaggio will be fine."

"Okay."

"Well, if everything's 'okay' then get back out there. You need to control those thunderclouds for an hour, remember."

Huh? "Control them?"

"Hmm? Well, yes. What's so strange about that?" Roxy asked.

"Just… I need to control them?"

"Of course. This is a Water Saint-tier magic spell, and if you don't keep your spell fueled with magic, your clouds are going to dissipate."

"But I already took steps to make sure they wouldn't," I said.

"Huh? Oh!" Roxy began rushing out of the dome as if she'd suddenly realized something. At this, the dome began to crumble.

Hey now, remember to control your magic or you'll bury the horse alive.

"Whoops!" Roxy hurriedly regained control of her spell, then stepped outside. She looked into the sky, astonished. "I see! You created a diagonal whirlwind in order to push the clouds up!"

The cumulonimbus clouds I'd created were still growing, seemingly without limit.

Not bad, if I said so myself.

A long time ago, I'd caught some TV special that went into the science behind supercell formation. I didn't remember the exact details, but I'd retained a vague visual impression of the process. Going off that, I'd managed to create something similar enough.

"Rudy," Roxy said, "you pass."

"Huh? But it hasn't been an hour yet."

"There's no need. If you can do that, you're more than competent enough," she replied. "Now then, can you make it go away?"

"Er, sure. It'll take a little while, though." I cooled the ground over a wide area, then warmed the air above in order to create a downward current, ultimately using some wind magic to scatter the clouds.

Once I was done, Roxy and I stood there, the two of us drenched to the

bone. “Congratulations,” Roxy said.

“You are now a Water Saint.” She looked stunning, her hand brushing aside her wet bangs, an all-too-rare grin on her face.

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I hadn't achieved anything in my past life. But I'd done something now. As soon as I realized that, a curious sensation welled up from within me. And I knew what it was. A sense of accomplishment.

For the first time since coming to this world, I felt like I'd truly taken my first step.

The following day, Roxy stood in the entryway to our house in her traveling gear, the spitting image of the person who had arrived two years prior. My mother and father didn't look much different, either. About the only thing that had changed was that I was taller.

"Roxy," Zenith said, "you're more than welcome to stay. I still have plenty of recipes that I could teach you."

Paul followed up. "Right. Your role as a home tutor may have come to an end, but we're in your debt for your help with the drought last year. I'm sure the villagers would be happy to have you stick around."

Here were my parents, trying to keep Roxy from leaving. Unbeknownst to me, they'd apparently become good friends. Which made sense; her afternoons had been a huge swath of free time, and I guess she'd spent it broadening her social circle. She wasn't just a love interest in a video game, whose circumstances only changed when the main character did something.

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm afraid I can't accept," Roxy replied. "Teaching your son has made me realize how powerless I truly am, so I'm going to head out and travel the world for a while to hone my magic."

She had to be a little shocked that I'd reached the same rank as her. And she'd said previously that having a pupil who exceeded her skills made her uncomfortable.

"I see," said Paul. "I suppose it is what it is. I'm sorry that our son caused you to lose confidence in yourself."

Hey! You didn't have to put it like that, Dad!

"Oh, no," Roxy said. "I'm grateful to be shown how conceited I've been."

"I'd hardly call you conceited when you're able to use Water Saint-tier magic," Paul countered.

“Even if I couldn’t, your son’s ingenuity has shown me that I can be capable of even stronger magic.” With a small grimace, Roxy put her hand on my head. “Rudy, I wanted to do my best for you, but I didn’t have what it takes to teach you.”

“That isn’t true. You taught me all sorts of things, Miss

Roxy.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” Roxy said. “Oh, and that reminds me!” She reached into the folds of her robe, fumbled around, and pulled out a pendant strung with a leather cord. It was made of a metal that shone with a green luster, fashioned in the shape of three interlocking spears. “This is to commemorate your graduation. I didn’t have much time to prepare it, but hopefully this will suffice.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a Migurd amulet. If you happen to run into any demons who give you a hard time, show them this and mention my name, and they should ease up on you a bit… probably.”

“I’ll be sure to take good care of it.”

“Remember, it’s not a guarantee. Don’t be overconfident.”

Then, at the very, very end, Roxy flashed a little smile, and departed.

Before I knew it, I was crying.

She really had given me so much: wisdom, experience, technique… If I’d never met her, I’d probably still be doing what I was before, fumbling my way through with *A Textbook of Magic* in one hand.

More than anything, though, she took me outside.

She took me outside. That was it. Such a simple thing. It was Roxy who’d done that for me. And that meant something. Roxy, who’d come to this village not even two years ago. Roxy, who looked like someone who’d never get along well with strangers. Roxy, a demon whom the villagers should have considered beneath their notice.

Not Paul. Not Zenith. Roxy was the one who took me to the outside world, and that meant something.

I say that she took me to the outside world, when really, all she did was

take me across town. Still, the prospect of leaving home had definitely been a traumatic one for me, and she'd cured me of that—just by taking me through the village. That had been enough to lift my spirits. She hadn't been trying to rehabilitate me, but I'd still had a breakthrough because of her.

Yesterday, after we'd gotten back home, soaking wet, I'd turned to look at the front gate and taken just one step beyond it. And right there was the ground. Just the ground, and nothing more. My anxieties had left me.

Now, I was capable of walking outside on my own.

She'd managed to do something for me that no one else ever had, not even my parents or siblings from my past life. *She* was the one who'd done it for me. I'd been given not irresponsible words, but a responsible sense of courage.

That hadn't been her aim: I knew that. She'd done it for herself, and I knew that, too. But I respected her.

Young as she was, I respected her.

I promised myself I wouldn't look away until Roxy disappeared from view. In my hands, I clutched the wand and the pendant she'd given me. I still had all the things she'd taught me.

Then I realized: Up in my room I still had a pair of her used panties that I'd stolen a few months ago.

Sorry about that, Roxy.

Chapter 7:
Friends

I decided to try going outside. After all, Roxy had shown me I could do that, and I wasn't going to let that go to waste.

"Father," I said, my botanical encyclopedia in one hand, "can I go and play outside?"

Children my age were prone to wandering as soon as you took your eyes off of them. Even if I stayed in the general neighborhood, I didn't want to worry my parents by slipping away without saying anything.

"Hmm? Play outside? Not just out in the yard, I take it?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. Well, sure. Of course you can." Paul gave his permission readily enough. "Come to think of it, we haven't given you much free time. Here we are, taking up all your time teaching you swordplay and spellcraft, but it's important for children to play, too."

"I really appreciate that I've got such good teachers."

I thought of Paul as a strict father who was worried too much about his kid's education, but his line of thinking was actually pretty flexible. I'd half-expected him to demand I spend all day working on my swordsmanship. It was almost a letdown.

Paul was a man of intuition. "But, hmm… you really want to go out? I used to think you were such a frail boy, but I guess time does fly, huh?"

"You thought I was frail?" This was news to me. I hadn't ever been sick or anything.

"Because of how you never used to cry."

"Oh. All right. But if I'm all right now, then it's no problem, yeah? I've grown up to be a healthy and charming boy! Seeeeee?" I pulled my cheeks and made a funny face.

Paul frowned. "It's the ways in which you *aren't* childish that worry

me more."

"Am I not turning out to be the firstborn son you wanted me to be?"

"No, it's not that."

"Given the look of disappointment on your face, would it be better to say that you're hoping I become a more fitting heir to the Greyrat family?" I posited.

"I'm not proud of it, but when I was your age, your old man was a total brat who was always going around chasing skirts."

"You were a skirt-chaser?" So, they had those in this world, too, huh?

And wait—did he just call *himself* a brat?

"If you really want to be worthy of the Greyrat family, go out there and bring home a girlfriend," he said.

Wait—was that the kind of family we were? Wasn't my dad a knight charged with protecting a frontier town in addition to being a low-ranking noble? Did we have no social standing at all? No, I guess we were just really low-ranking.

"Understood," I said. "Then I'll be heading off into the village to look for a skirt or two to chase after."

"Hey now. You need to be nice to girls. And don't go around bragging just because you can use powerful magic. Real men don't get strong just to brag about it."

That was actually good advice. Man, I wish my brothers from my past life could have heard that.

But Paul was right; power wielded for its own sake was meaningless. And even I was able to understand that, given the terms he'd put it in. "I understand, Father; power should be reserved for when you can make girls see how cool you look."

"That's, uh, not exactly what I meant…"

It's not? Wasn't that where this discussion was going?

Heheh. Whoops!

"I'm just joking," I said. "It's for protecting the weak, right?"

"Yes, exactly."

With that conversation concluded, I tucked my botanical encyclopedia back under one arm, slung the wand I'd received from Roxy at my hip, and headed out. Before I got far, though, I stopped and turned, remembering one last thing. "Oh, by the way, Father, I think I'll probably go out like this on occasion, but I promise I'll always tell someone at home first, and I won't neglect my daily magic and sword studies either. And I promise to be home before the sun goes down and it gets dark, and I won't go anywhere dangerous." I wanted to leave him with some reassurance, after all.

"Ah, yeah. Sure." For some reason, Paul sounded a little out of it. *Look, if you're giving me permission, just say so.*

"Okay then," I said. "I'm off."

"Come back safe."

And then, I left home.

***

Several days went by. I wasn't afraid of the outside world anymore. Things were going pretty well. I was even able to exchange greetings with passersby without mumbling my way through.

People knew about me—that I was the son of Paul and Zenith, and Roxy's disciple. When I ran into people for the first time, I'd greet them properly and introduce myself. People I was meeting again got a "good day." Everyone greeted me back, bright smiles on their faces. It had been a long time since I'd felt so open and carefree.

Paul and Roxy's combined relative fame was more than half of what helped me feel so comfortable. The rest was all thanks to what Roxy had done for me. Which meant, I guess, that Roxy was to thank for the bulk of it.

I'd have to take very good care of those treasured panties.

***

My main goal in going outside was to go exploring on my own two feet and get the lay of the land. If I knew my way around, then I wouldn't get lost if I ever got kicked out of my house.

At the same time, I also wanted to carry out some botanical investigations. I had my encyclopedia, after all, so I wanted to make sure I could tell which plants were edible and which weren't, which could be used as medicine and which were poisonous. That way, if I ever got kicked out of my house, I wouldn't need to worry about where I'd get food from.

Roxy had only taught me the basics, but by my understanding, our village grew wheat, vegetables, and the fragrant ingredients of perfumes. The Vatirus flower, used in those perfumes, was very similar to lavender: pale purple and edible.

With a visually striking specimen like that as my test case, I started using the botanical encyclopedia to cross-reference whichever plants caught my eye.

As it turned out, however, the village wasn't very large, and we didn't have particularly notable flora. After a few days of basically nothing, I expanded my search radius and made my way closer to the forest. There were a lot more plants there, after all.

"If I remember right, magic builds up more readily in forests, which makes them more dangerous." More dangerous because higher concentrations of magic meant a higher likelihood of monsters coming into being, the energies causing sudden mutations in otherwise benign creatures. What I didn't know was why magic accumulated more easily there.

In addition to monsters being fairly rare in these parts, we also had regular monster hunts, making things even safer. A monster hunt was exactly what it sounded like: Once a month, a group of young men, made up of knights, hunters, and the local militia, would head into the woods and clear some monsters out.

Apparently, though, monsters that were quite dreadful could suddenly turn up in the depths of the forest. Maybe part of why I'd learned magic was to do battle against such things. But I was a former shut-in who couldn't even handle schoolyard scuffles. I couldn't afford to be arrogant. I had no actual combat experience, and if I screwed up in the heat of the moment, it'd be a total disaster. I'd seen far too many people get killed doing that sort of thing

—well, in manga, anyway.

But I wasn't the hot-blooded type. As far as I was concerned, combat was something to be avoided as best as possible. If I ran into a monster, I'd run back home and let Paul know.

Yeah, that was a good plan.

With that in mind, I made my way up a small hill. At the top stood a lone tree, the largest one around. A high vantage point like this would be perfect for confirming the layout of my village. Also, this being the biggest tree in the area, I wanted to see what type it was.

And that's when I heard them. Voices.

"We don't need no demons in our village!"

At the sound of that voice, painful memories came flooding back. I remembered my time in high school, and what had led to my becoming a shut-in. I remembered the nightmares about being called "Pencil Dick."

These voices reminded me so very much of the voices that had called me by that terrible nickname. These were the voices of someone who used the numbers on their side to torment somebody beneath them.

"Get the hell out of here!"

"Take this!"

"Ha, nice! Direct hit, man!"

I saw a field, muddy from the other day's rain. Three boys with their bodies all caked in mud were hurling mud at another boy who was walking along.

"Ten points if you can nail him in the head!"

"Hngh!"

"I got him! Didja see that?! Right in the head!"

Yikes. This was *not* good. This was classic bullying right here. These kids thought this other boy wasn't good enough for them, so they could do whatever the hell they wanted. If they'd gotten their hands on an air gun, they would have turned it on this kid and opened fire. The directions always said not to point those things at people and shoot, but boys like these didn't see their targets as people. They were abhorrent.

Their target could have quickly shuffled on his way, but for some reason, he was dawdling. I looked more closely and saw that he had something like a basket clutched to his chest, which he hunched over to keep its contents safe from the balls of mud being hurled his way. It was keeping him from getting away from the bullies' onslaught.

"Hey, he's got something!"

"Is that his demon treasure?!"

"I bet it's something he stole!"

"If you can bullseye that, it's worth a hundred points!"

"Let's get that treasure!"

I broke into a run, heading for the boy. Along the way, I used my magic to form a ball of mud, and the instant I was in firing range, I hurled it with all my might.

Whap!

"What the hell?!" I hit the kid who looked like their leader, a conspicuously large fellow, right in the face. "Gah, it got in my eyes!"

His buddies all turned their attention to me at once.

"Who the heck're you?"

"This ain't got nothing to do with you! Stay out of it!"

"What are you, an ally of the demons or something?" Guess people like this were the same in every world.

"I'm no ally to the demons," I said. "I'm an ally to the weak." I gave them a haughty sneer.

The other boys steeled themselves, drawing themselves up as if they were in the right. "Don't you try to act tough!" one of them snapped.

"Hey, he's that one knight's kid!"

"Hah! He's just a baby!"

Uh-oh. They'd figured out who I was.

"You sure the son of a knight should be doing this sort of thing, huh?"

"See, I told ya that knight was on the demons' side!"

“C’mon, let’s get the others!”

“Hey, guys! We’ve got some weirdo here!” Crap. These kids were calling for their friends!

But no one showed up.

Even still, my legs were locked in place. Sure, there were three of them, but it felt so pathetic, freezing up at having kids shout at me. Was mine just destined to be the saga of a bullied shut-in?

“Y-you shut up!” I bit back. “Ganging up on a kid three-to-one—you guys are the worst!”

Their faces screwed up in confusion. Ugh. Dammit.

“Hey, you’re the one who’s shouting now, you dumbass!” one of them blurted.

I was pissed off, so I hurled another mudball their way.

I missed.

“You little brat!”

“Where the heck is he getting the mud from?!”

“It doesn’t matter! Just throw it back!”

What I’d dished out was being returned threefold, but thanks to the footwork Paul had taught me, as well as a bit of magic, I was able to dodge the volley rather gracefully.

“Hey! Knock it off!”

“Yeah, you’re not supposed to dodge!”

Heheheh. Hey, if you can’t hit me, that’s your problem, fellas!

The three boys continued to throw balls of mud my way for a while longer, but when it became apparent they weren’t going to hit me, they threw up their hands as if they’d suddenly found something better to do.

“Aw, this is boring!”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

“And we’re gonna let everyone know the knight’s kid is a demon-lover!”

They tried to make it sound like they hadn't lost—that they'd just decided to stop. With that, the little punks headed off for the other end of the field.

I'd done it! For the very first time in my life, I'd beaten the bullies!

Er, not to brag or anything.

Whew. Arguments like that really weren't my strong suit after all. I'm glad things hadn't come to blows. For now, I needed to check on the kid they'd been throwing mud at. I turned to him and asked, "Hey, are you all right? Are your things okay?"

Whoa…

The boy was so pretty it was hard to think we were around the same age. He had rather long eyelashes for someone so young, with a dainty little nose, thin lips, and a somewhat pointed jawline. His skin was porcelain white, and his features combined to give him the look of a startled rabbit, in addition to a sense of unspeakable beauty.

Man, if only Paul had been the prettier sort. Maybe I'd have a face like that.

No, Paul wasn't bad-looking. And Zenith looked really good. Which meant my face was fine. Certainly compared to my face in my past life, all flabby and marked with pimples. So, yeah, I was pretty good-looking. Yeah.

The boy turned his timid gaze back to me. "Y-yeah, I'm…I'm okay."

He made me want to protect and care for him, as if he were some small animal. If you were a lady who was into shota stuff, he'd have your panties soaked on the spot—er, well, if you could get past the way he was all caked in mud.

His clothes were filthy, and mud clung to half of his face. The top of his head was basically a uniform brown. It bordered on miraculous that he'd managed to keep his basket safe.

There was only one thing for me to do. "Here, why don't you set that down over there and kneel by the irrigation ditch," I said.

"Huh? Whuh?" The boy blinked in confusion even as he began to do as I said. Guess he was the sort of kid who did what he was told. If he were the defiant sort, he would have fought back against those bullies earlier.

He crawled over to the irrigation ditch, hunched on all fours as he peered into the water. If you were a guy who was into shota stuff, you'd currently have a definite throbbing in your pants, too.

"Here," I said. "Close your eyes." I used some fire magic to heat the water to an appropriate temperature: neither too hot nor too cold, but a nice, warm forty degrees Celsius. I then took some of it and doused the boy's head.

"Gwah!"

I grabbed his collar as he squirmed and tried to get away, and proceeded to wash away the mud. He struggled at first, but as he got used to the water's temperature, he started to calm down. As for his clothes, those would have to be laundered at home.

"All right, that should about do it," I said. With the mud out of the way, I used fire magic to create hot wind, like an air dryer, then took a handkerchief to carefully wipe the rest of the boy's face.

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In doing so, I could finally see his pointed, elf-like ears, as well as the emerald green hair he sported. I immediately remembered something Roxy had told me.

"If you ever see someone with emerald-green hair, make sure you don't go anywhere near them."

Hm? Wait, hold on. That wasn't quite right. I think it was…

"If you ever see someone with emerald-green hair and what looks like a red jewel set in their forehead, make sure you don't go anywhere near them."

Yeah, that was it! I'd forgotten the bit about the red jewel. This kid's forehead, however, was nothing but a smooth and pretty white.

Whew. I was safe. He wasn't one of those nasty Superds. "Th-thank you…"

The boy's words of gratitude snapped me back into the moment. Dang. He was kinda giving me the tingles there.

I decided to give him some advice. "Listen, if you just roll over for people like that, they're never going to leave you alone, you know."

"I can't beat those guys…"

"You need to want to fight back; that's the key."

"But they've always got bigger kids with them. And I don't want to get hurt…"

Ah, so that was it. If he fought back, those kids would call for their friends, and they'd give him a thorough beating. No matter what world you lived in, that was a thing. Roxy had put in a lot of effort, so the grown-ups seemed to have accepted demons, but not the children. Kids could be so cruel.

This right here wasn't too far from outright bigotry. "You must have it rough, getting bullied just because the color of your hair makes you look like a Superd."

"You're…not bothered by it?"

"My teacher was a demon. What race do you belong to?" I asked. Roxy had told me that the Migurd and Superd were closely related. Maybe

his race was, too.

But the boy just shook his head. “I don’t know.”

He didn’t know? At his age? That was odd. “Well, what race is your father?”

“He’s a half-elf. His other half is human, he said.”

“And your mother?”

“She’s human, but she also has some beastman blood in there, too.”

The child of a half-elf and a quarter-beastman? Did that explain his hair, then?

Tears welled up in the boy’s eyes. “And so they—m-my dad, he…he tells me I’m not a demon, b-but…my hair isn’t the same color as his or my mom’s…”

He started to sob, and I reached over to reassuringly pat his head. If his hair color didn’t match either of his parents’, though, that was a big deal. The possibility that his mother had had an affair occurred to me. “Is your hair color the only thing that’s different?”

“My…my ears are longer than my dad’s, too.”

“I see.” A demon race that had long ears and green hair sounded plausible enough. I mean, I didn’t want to pry too hard into the affairs of a stranger’s home life, but I’d been a bullied child myself, so I wanted to do something for him. Also, I just felt so bad for him, being bullied just for having green hair.

Some of the bullying I’d experienced had been a result of stupid things I’d done. But not this kid. No amount of effort on his part could change how he’d been born. He’d been destined from birth to have mudballs pelted at him on the roadside just because his hair was a bit green. Ugh.

Just thinking of it was enough to piss me off again.

“Does your dad treat you nicely?” I asked.

“Yeah. He’s scary when he’s mad, but he doesn’t get mad if I behave.”

“And what about your mom?”

“She’s nice.”

Hmm. His tone of voice indicated that he was telling the truth. Then again, I couldn't really know for sure without seeing for myself.

"All right," I said. "Let's go, shall we?"

"G-go where?"

"Wherever it is you're going." Hey, stick with a kid, and his parents are bound to show up. That's, like, a law of nature.

"Wh-why are you coming with me?"

"Well, those guys from before might come back. I'll drive 'em off. Are you on your way home? Or are you taking that basket someplace?"

"I'm, ah, delivering m-my dad's lunch…"

His father was a half-elf, yeah? When elves turned up in stories, they tended to be long-lived and isolationist people with haughty dispositions who looked down on other races. They were skilled with the bow and also with magic. Water and wind magic were their forte. Oh, and they had long ears, of course.

Roxy had said, "That's largely accurate, though they aren't particularly isolationist."

Were the majority of elven men and women super-gorgeous in this world, too? No, no. Thinking of elves as all being super-gorgeous was a crass Japanese preconception. The elves in Western games had faces that were too angular and pointed and didn't look particularly gorgeous at all. Guess Japanese otaku and foreign normies had different sensibilities.

In the case of this boy here, though, it was a given that his parents were hot.

"So, um…why…why are you…protecting me?" he asked haltingly, his mannerisms evoking more of that protective instinct in me.

"My father told me that I should be an ally to the weak."

"But…the other kids might exclude you because of it…"

Maybe so. It was a common story: getting bullied for helping out a victim of bullying.

"If that happens, I'll just play with you," I said. "As of today, we're friends."

"What?!"

Our chips were in the same pile now. The chain of bullying grew when the person being helped turned on their helper instead of being grateful and repaying that kindness. Granted, the reason for this kid being victimized was rooted in something deeper than that, so I doubted he'd flip and side with the bullies.

"Oh, are you usually too busy helping out around the house?" I asked.

"N-no, not really…" He mustered a timid expression and a shake of the head. Man, he really did have quite the face. If you were a shota fangirl looking for a fix, he'd have you hooked on the spot.

You know, this might work out nicely, him having a face like that. He was sure to draw in plenty of girls once he grew up, and if I stuck with him, the ones he didn't pick might come my way. My own face wasn't anything too special, but if you took two guys and stood them next to each other, the better one of them looked, the more ordinary-looking the other guy appeared. And so girls who were less confident in themselves were sure to try for me.

Besides, I prefer a girl who's a little unsure of herself as opposed to one who's brimming with confidence.

This could work. It was like how pretty girls kept ugly ones nearby so everyone would notice how pretty they were, but in reverse.

"Oh, that's right. I haven't gotten your name yet. I'm Rudeus."

"I…I'm Sylph—" His voice was so quiet that it was hard to make out the second part. Sylph, huh?

"That's a nice name. Just like a spirit of the wind."

At that, Sylph's face turned red, and he nodded. "Yeah."

***

Sylph's father was a very attractive man. He had pointed ears and blond hair that almost glittered, and he was slender without lacking muscle definition. Certainly, he lived up to the name of half-elf, having inherited the best parts of both elf and human.

He stood guard at a watchtower on the edge of the forest, a bow in one hand. “Father,” Sylph called. “I’ve brought your lunch.”

“Ah, thank you, Phi, as always. Did you get bullied again today?”

“I’m okay. Someone helped me out.”

Sylph turned to look my way, and I bowed slightly.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “I’m Rudeus Greyrat.”

“Greyrat? As in Paul Greyrat?”

“Yes, sir. He’s my father.”

“Ah, yes, I’ve heard of you! My, what a polite boy you are. Oh, you’ll have to forgive me. I’m Laws. I typically hunt in these forests.”

Based on what I’d heard, this watchtower was set up as a lookout post to keep monsters from making it out of the forest, and was staffed by men from the village around the clock. Naturally, Paul was on the roster as well, which explained why Laws knew him. I’m sure they’d talked to one another about their respective children.

“I know how my kid must look, but it’s just something from further back in our ancestry,” Laws said. “I do hope you’ll be friends with each other.”

“Of course, sir. And even if Sylph was a Superd, it wouldn’t change my attitude one bit. I stake my father’s honor on it.”

Laws let out a sound of astonishment. “Those are impressive words for a boy your age,” he said. “I’m kind of jealous that Paul has such a bright kid.”

“Being good at things as a child doesn’t mean that person will keep being good at things as an adult,” I said. “You don’t need to be jealous now when there’s still time for Sylph to grow up.” I figured I should put in a nice word.

“Heh. Now I see what Paul was talking about.”

“What did my father say?”

“That talking to you makes one feel like an underqualified parent.”

While we were talking, I felt a tug at the hem of my shirt. I looked, and

Sylph was clutching it, his head cast down. I guessed a grown-up conversation like this was boring for children.

"Mr. Laws," I asked, "can the two of us go play for a bit?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Just don't get too close to the forest."

Well, that went without saying. I felt like there should have been more ground rules than that.

"On our way here, there was a hill with a big tree on top. I figured we'd go play around there. I promise Sylph will head back home before it gets dark. And once your kid gets home, could you look out in the direction of that hill? If it looks like I haven't gone home, there's a good chance something's wrong. Could you please arrange a search if that happens?"

After all, there weren't any cell phones in this world. Establishing proper communication was important. It was impossible to avoid all potential trouble, but bouncing back quickly from problems was also important. This kingdom seemed fairly safe, but there was no telling where dangers might be lurking.

With one look back at Laws, who was a bit dumbfounded, Sylph and I headed back for the tree on the hilltop. "So, what did you want to play?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I've…never played with a…a friend before." Sylph struggled to get the word "friend" out. I supposed he really never had one before. I felt so bad for him…but I didn't have friends, either.

"Yeah," I said, "Until recently I never really left the house myself. But anyway, what did you want to play?"

Sylph wrung his hands together and gazed up at me. We were roughly the same height, but because he kept himself hunched over, he had to look up at me. "So, um, how come you keep changing the way you talk?"

"Hm? Oh! Depending on who you're talking to, it's rude not to speak properly. You need to show deference to your elders."

"Def-er-ence?"

"Like the way I was speaking to your father before."

"Hmm…" He sounded like he didn't quite understand, but he'd get it

eventually. That was part of growing up.

"More importantly," Sylph said, "could you teach me that thing you did earlier?"

"What thing?"

Sylph's eyes glimmered to life. He postured and waved his hands as he explained: "Like when you made warm water go all *sploosh* from your hands, and when you made that nice warm wind like *whoosh*."

"Ah, yes. That." The magic I'd used to clear away the mud.

"Is it difficult?"

"It's difficult, but with training, anyone can do it. Probably." Lately, my magical reserves had grown so much I wasn't even sure how much I was expending, to say nothing of what the baseline was for people here. But then, this was just using fire to warm water. People probably couldn't just up and conjure hot water without an incantation, but with Combined Magic, anyone could reproduce the effects. That's why it was probably fine. Probably.

"Okay then!" I announced. "Today, we'll begin your training!"

And so, Sylph and I played until the sun went down.

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When I got back home, Paul was furious.

He stood imposingly in the entryway, hands set on his hips in an expression of his anger. I immediately tried to think of what I'd done wrong. The first thing that came to mind was that he'd discovered the precious panties that I'd secreted away.

"Father, I'm home," I said.

"Do you know why I'm upset?"

"I don't." First, I had to play dumb. I didn't want to bring unnecessary trouble upon myself in the event my prized possession hadn't been discovered.

"Mr. Eto's wife came by earlier and told me that you punched their

boy, Somal."

Who the heck were Mr. Eto and Somal? The names didn't ring a bell, so I had to think. I hadn't had much interaction with the townsfolk beyond basic introductions.

I'd given them my name and gotten theirs in return, but I couldn't recall whether or not there had been an "Eto" among them.

Wait. Hold on. "Was this today?" I asked.

"Yes."

The only people I'd run into today were Sylph, Laws, and those three punks. Was Somal one of those three boys, then? "I didn't punch him. All I did was throw some mud at him."

"Do you remember what it was I told you earlier?"

"That men don't get strong just to brag about it?"

"That's right."

Aha. Now I got it. Come to think of it, that kid had said something about how he was gonna let everyone know I was a demon-lover. I don't know how that turned into him lying about me punching him, but either way, he was determined to badmouth me.

"I'm not sure what you heard, Father, but—"

"Oh, no you don't!" Paul snapped. "When you've done something wrong, the first thing you do is apologize!" Whatever lie this kid had told, my dad had clearly bought it. Crap. At this point, even if I told the truth about me saving Sylph from those bullies, it'd just sound like an outright lie.

Still, all I could do was explain what happened from the very beginning. "Okay, so I was walking down the road when—"

"No excuses!" Paul grew even more irate. He had no intentions of hearing me out.

I could have just said "sorry," but I felt like that wasn't going to be fair to Paul, either. I didn't want him to make a habit of behaving like this with any younger brother or sister he might well make for me.

This method of punishment wasn't fair. I kept my mouth shut.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?” Paul demanded.

“Because if I do, you’re just going to yell at me not to make excuses.”

Paul’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Before a kid can even say anything, you yell at them and make them apologize. Everything is so quick and easy with you adults. Must be nice.”

“Rudy!”

Whap! A hot jolt of pain shot through my cheek.

He hit me.

I mean, I’d expected as much. Talk shit, get hit.

That’s why I firmly held my ground. I probably hadn’t been hit in around twenty years. No—I’d gotten my ass beaten when I was kicked out of my house, so that made five years, I supposed.

“Father, I have always put in the utmost effort to be a good son. Not once have I ever talked back to you or Mother, and I’ve always done my very best to do whatever you both tell me.”

“That…that has nothing to do with this!” It didn’t look as though Paul had intended to strike me. There was a distinct look of consternation in his eyes.

Whatever. That was good for me. “Yes, it does. I’ve always done my best to keep your mind at ease and to get you to trust me, Father. You didn’t listen to a word I said, and not only did you take the word of someone I don’t know and yell at me, you even raised your hand to me.”

“But this Somal kid got hurt…”

Hurt? That was news to me. Had I done that to him? If I had, maybe he was using it to sell his story. Well, too bad. I was justified in what I’d done. Assuming this whole thing about his being hurt wasn’t just some dumb lie anyway.

“Even if it does wind up that it’s my fault he got hurt, I’m not going to apologize for it,” I said. “I didn’t go against anything you taught me, and I’m proud of what I did.”

“Wait, hold on. What happened?”

Oh, now he was suddenly curious? Hey, it was his own fault for deciding he wouldn't listen to me. "What happened about not wanting to hear excuses?"

Paul's face twisted into a frown. It seemed I was close now.

"Please don't worry, Father. The next time I see three people going after someone who won't fight back, I'll ignore it. In fact, I'll jump in so that it's four on one. I'll make sure that everyone around knows that the Greyrats take pride in bullying and ganging up on the weak. But once I grow up and leave home, I'll never use the Greyrat name again. I'll be too ashamed to let anyone know I belonged to a family so horrid they ignored actual violence and accepted verbal abuse."

Paul fell dead silent. His face turned red, then went pale, and there was conflict in his expression. Was he going to be mad? Or had I still not pushed him over the edge?

You should quit while you're ahead, Paul. I know I don't look it, but I've spent over twenty years talking my way out of arguments I can't win. If you had even one solid point to make, this might end in a draw, but justice is on my side this time. You don't have any hope of winning this one.

"I'm sorry," Paul said, hanging his head. "I was wrong. Tell me what happened."

Yeah, see? Digging your heels in just makes things worse for the both of us. Remember, when you do something wrong, the first thing you do is apologize.

Relieved, I explained the details of the situation as objectively as I could. I was making my way up the hill when I heard voices. There were three boys in an empty field pelting mud at another boy walking along the road. I hit them with mud once or twice until they backed down, and then they left while badmouthing me. Then, I used magic to clean the mud off the one boy, and we played together.

"So, yeah," I said, "if I'm going to apologize, this Somal kid needs to apologize to Sylph first. When you're hurt physically, you'll heal soon enough, but emotional hurt doesn't go away so quickly."

Paul's shoulders drooped despondently. "You're right. I had this all wrong. I'm sorry."

When I saw that, I recalled what Laws had told me earlier: "*Talking to you makes one feel like an underqualified parent*." Had Paul's attempt at scolding me been him trying to show more of his paternal side?

Well, if so, he'd lost this round.

"You don't need to apologize. In the future, if you think what I've done is wrong, by all means, scold me as you like. All I ask is that you hear me out first. There are going to be times when words don't cut it, or where it's just going to sound like I'm making excuses, but if I have something to say, please just try to see my side of things."

"I'll keep that in mind. I mean, I don't expect that you'll be in the wrong in the first place, but—"

"When I am, use that as a learning opportunity for disciplining whatever younger brother or sister you wind up giving me in the future."

"Yeah. I'll do that," Paul said self-deprecatingly. The man was clearly in poor spirits.

Had I gone too far? I mean, losing an argument to your five-year-old son? That'd take the wind out of my sails for sure. I supposed he was a bit young to be a father.

"By the way, Father, how old are you?"

"Hm? I'm twenty-four."

"I see." So, he would have been nineteen when he got married and had me? I didn't know the average age for marriage in this world, but with things like monsters and war and such being an everyday occurrence, that sounded pretty appropriate.

A man more than a decade my junior had gotten married, had a kid, and was now struggling with how to raise him. Given my thirty-four-year-history of indolent joblessness, you wouldn't think I'd be able to outdo him at much of anything.

Ah, well.

"Father, could I bring Sylph over to play sometime?"

"Hm? Oh, of course."

Satisfied with that response, I headed into the house with my father. I

was glad he didn't hold any prejudice against demons.

Paul

My son was angry. The boy had never been one to display much overt emotion, but here he was, silently fuming. How did it come to this?

It started that afternoon, when Mrs. Eto came by our house, furious. She brought along her son Somal, considered one of the neighborhood brats. There was a blue bruise around one of his eyes. As a swordsman who'd seen my fair share of battle, I knew right away that he'd taken a punch.

His mother's story was long and rambling, but the gist was that my boy had punched hers. When I heard that, I was inwardly relieved.

Ordinarily, I might have assumed my son had been playing outside, caught sight of Somal and his buddies playing, and tried to join them. But my boy wasn't like other kids; he was already a Water Saint magician at his age. He'd probably said something high-and-mighty, the other kids had fired back, and then they'd all gotten into a fight. My boy was pretty clever and mature for his age, but he was still a kid, after all.

Mrs. Eto continued to get red in the face and then went pale as she tried to make this out to be a major bust-up, when it was just a quarrel among children in the end. And just by looking, you could tell that her son's injury wasn't even going to leave a mark. I'd scold my boy, and that would be the end of it.

Children were bound to get into scuffles that turned to blows at some point, but Rudeus was far more powerful than other children. Not only had he been the disciple of the young Water Saint, Roxy, I'd been training him since he was three. Any fight he got into was sure to be one-sided.

Things had gone okay this time, but if he ever got too hot-headed, he might wind up overdoing it. A smart kid like Rudeus ought to be able to deal with someone like Somal without throwing a punch. I needed to teach him that punching someone was a rash thing to do, and he needed to give it more thought before resorting to it.

I needed to give him a bit of a harsh scolding.

That had been the plan, anyway. How did it go so wrong?

My son had no intention of apologizing to me whatsoever. Rather, he looked at me like one might look at an insect.

I'm sure that, from my son's perspective, they were having a fight on equal footing. But when someone has powers like his, they need to be aware of how just how strong they are. Besides, he'd hurt someone. I needed him to apologize. He was a smart kid. He might not understand now, but I was sure he'd arrive at the right answer in due time.

With that in mind, I took a firm tone to ask what had happened, only for him to respond with condescension and sarcasm. It galled me, and in the heat of the moment, I struck him. And here I was, trying to teach him a lesson about how people with power shouldn't resort to violence against people weaker than them.

I'd hit him. I knew I was in the wrong, but I couldn't say that while trying to give my boy a lecture. I couldn't tell him not to do what I'd done moments earlier myself. While I struggled with my rattled composure, my son implied he'd done nothing wrong, and even said that if I had a problem with that, he'd leave home.

I almost told him right there to go ahead, go, but I managed to resist the urge. I had to. I was from a strict family myself, with an overbearing father who'd tear into me without giving me a fair shake. My resentment had grown to the point where we had a huge fight that ended with me storming out of the house.

My father's blood ran in my veins—the blood of a stubborn, unyielding curmudgeon. And it ran in Rudeus's veins as well. Just look at how stubborn he could be. He was definitely my kid.

When I was told to get out, I gave my old man some tit for tat and did exactly as he said. I might drive Rudeus off as well. He said he'd wait until he grew up before leaving home, but if I told him to get out right now, I bet he would. I was sure it was in his nature.

I heard that, not long after I left, my father took ill and died. And I heard he regretted our big fight until the very end. And I was glad to hear it.

No—if I'm being honest, I regretted it, too. If I told Rudeus to get out and he really did leave, I'd surely regret that, as well.

I had to be patient. Hadn't I learned from experience, after all? Besides, on the day my child was born, I decided that I would never be a father like mine.

"You're right. I had this all wrong. I'm sorry." The apology came out naturally.

Rudeus's expression softened, and he went on to explain what happened. He told me that he came across Laws's kid getting bullied and stepped in to help. Rather than punch anyone, he'd just tossed balls of mud. It could hardly be called a proper fight.

If what Rudeus said was true, then what he'd done was a laudable thing, something he should be proud of. But instead of being praised for his actions, all he got was a father who wouldn't listen and struck him instead.

When I was young, my father did the same thing to me so many times, never listening to my side of things and always blaming me for not being a perfect son. Each time it happened, I felt so miserable and helpless.

Well, whatever lesson I'd been trying to teach here, I'd failed. Ugh.

But Rudeus didn't blame me for it. He even consoled me in the end. He was a good kid. Almost too good. Was I even really his father? No—Zenith wasn't the type to have an affair, and besides, there was no father good enough to produce a child like him. Man, I never expected my seed would bear such strong fruit.

More than pride, though, what I felt was an ache in my gut.

"Father, could I bring Sylph over to play sometime?"

"Hm? Oh, of course."

For now, I could at least be happy that my son had made his first friend.

Chapter 8:
Obliviousness

I was now six. My day-to-day life hadn't changed much. Mornings, I worked on my sword training. In the afternoon, if I had time, I'd do some fieldwork, or practice magic under the tree on the hill.

Recently, I'd been experimenting with ways to augment my swordsmanship with magic. I'd use a gust of wind to accelerate my sword's swing, create a shockwave to quickly turn myself around, turn the ground to mud under an opponent's feet and mire them in place, and the like.

Some people might think that my swordplay wasn't improving, since I was spending all my time on these little tricks, but I didn't agree. There were two ways to get better at fighting games: keep practicing to improve, or find a different way to beat your opponent with your inferior skills.

Right now, I was only thinking of the latter. Defeating Paul was the challenge at hand. Paul was a tough guy. He might have a ways to go in the parenting department, but as a swordsman, he was first-rate. If I were to focus on the first method, and hone my physique to an absurd degree, I was sure I could beat him someday.

However, I was six years old. In ten years, I'd be sixteen, and Paul would be thirty-five. Five years after that, I'd be twenty-one, and he'd be forty. So, yeah, I could beat him someday, but by then, it wouldn't mean anything. Defeating someone far older than you just got brushed off with claims of, "Oh, if this were back in my day…"

Defeating Paul while he was still in his prime—that would mean something. Right now, he was twenty-five years old. He might have retired from the frontlines, but he was currently at his physical peak. I wanted to beat him at least once within the next five years. With the blade, if possible, but if that proved unfeasible, then at least in a close-combat situation where I could weave my magic into the mix.

That was what I kept in mind as I headed out for my day's training.

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Under the tree atop the hill, Sylph came by, as he usually did. “Sorry,” he said. “I hope I didn’t keep you waiting.”

“Not at all,” I replied. “I just got here myself.” That’s how we’d start things off: like a couple, where one would wait for the other before we began.

Back when we first started playing, Somal or some other local punks would come by. Sometimes older kids—school-aged or in their early teens—would be in the mix, but I drove them all off. Whenever I did, Somal’s mother would come by my house to yell at me.

That’s when I figured out that Somal’s mother wasn’t so much invested in castigating children as she was fond of Paul. She was using scuffles between little kids as an excuse to come and see him. She was absurd. At the barest scratch, she’d march over to our place with her son in tow, which Somal didn’t seem too pleased with. So, yeah, he wasn’t faking injuries after all. Sorry for doubting him.

I think they came after us about five times. Then, one day, they stopped coming our way altogether. Occasionally, we’d catch sight of them playing off in the distance, or we’d pass each other by, but neither side ever said anything. We’d apparently agreed to just ignore one another.

With that, the issue seemed to be resolved, and the tree on top of the hill became our territory.

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Anyway, less about those punks and more about Sylph.

What we referred to as “playing” was, in fact, magic training. If Sylph picked up a bit of spellcraft, he could fend off bullies by himself.

In the beginning, Sylph was only able to cast five or six entry-level spells before getting short of breath, but a year had gone by, and his magical reserves had grown significantly. Now, he could train for half the day without an issue.

I had very little belief in the idea that there were limits on a person's magical reserves anymore.

Still, there was work needed on the spells themselves. Sylph was especially poor with fire. He could handle wind and water magic quite deftly, but fire was his weak spot. I wondered why. Was it because he had elven blood?

No, that wasn't right. During my lessons with Roxy, I'd learned about "affinity schools" and "opposition schools." As the names suggested, some people had an affinity for certain schools of magic, while other schools inherently gave them trouble.

Once I asked Sylph if he was afraid of fire. He shook his head and said he wasn't, but he showed me his palm, where he had a burn scar. When he was about three, he'd grabbed a metal skewer set over the hearth while his parents weren't looking. "I'm not scared anymore," he said, but I bet he still had some instinctual fear.

Experiences like that had an impact on what became one's opposition schools. With dwarves, for instance, water was a very common opposition school. Dwarves lived close to the mountains, and spent their childhoods playing in the dirt before following in their parents' footsteps by learning blacksmithing or mining and the like, which made them naturally more adept with earth and fire. Up in the mountains, there was also the risk of geysers suddenly erupting and causing steam burns, or heavy rains drowning people in floods, so it was easy for water to become an opposition school. So, yeah, there wasn't a direct relationship between magic and what race you were; it was more of an environmental thing.

Incidentally, I didn't have any opposition schools myself, due to my comfortable upbringing.

You didn't really need fire to create warm water or a warm breeze, but since trying to explain that concept was a pain, I had Sylph practice with fire as well. He had nothing to lose by being able to use it whenever he needed. For example, heat could be used to eradicate salmonella, so if you didn't want to die of food poisoning, you needed to use a bit of fire. Though I guessed even Beginner-tier detoxification magic could neutralize most poisons.

Despite his struggles, Sylph didn't complain as he went through his

training, probably because he wanted to back up his claims of not being afraid. He looked so cute with my wand (the one I'd gotten from Roxy) in one hand and my magic textbook (the one I brought from home) in the other, his face steeled in concentration as he chanted. And if a boy like me was thinking that, he was sure to be super-hot once he grew up.

A father's heart is a jealous heart…

The words rang clearly in my head as if they'd been said aloud, but I quickly shook my head and banished the thought. This wasn't a matter of jealousy. Besides, his being good-looking was part of my plan: Operation Hot Friend Bait.

"Hey, Rudy?" Sylph asked. "What's this word here?"

His voice banished the song from my head. He was gazing up at me, pointing at one of the pages in *A Textbook of Magic*. And that look he was giving me was a powerful one. I wanted to just wrap my arms around him and pull him into a kiss. But I managed to resist the urge.

"That says 'avalanche.'"

"What does it mean?"

"When tremendous amounts of snow build up on a mountain, it can't bear its own weight, and it all comes collapsing down. You know how when snow builds up on your roof it sometimes comes flumping off? It's like a way bigger version of that."

"Oh, wow. That sounds incredible. Have you ever seen one?"

"An avalanche? Of course I…haven't." Not outside of TV, anyway.

Sylph had me read from *A Textbook of Magic*. This was also part of teaching him how to read and write. No harm in learning literacy. There was no spell in this world that could do that for you. The lower the literacy rate, the more valuable being able to read was.

"I did it!" Sylph cheered. He'd managed to cast the Intermediate-tier water spell Ice Pillar. A shaft of water sprang from the ground, glinting brightly in the sunlight.

"Hey, you're getting pretty good," I said.

"Uh-huh!" Sylph replied, and then he tilted his head. "But there's stuff

you do that isn't written in here, huh?"

"Huh?" It took me a few moments to realize he was talking about that thing I'd done with the warm water. I flipped briskly through *A Textbook of Magic*, then pointed at two entries. "No, it's written in here. Waterfall and Heat Hand."

"Hm?"

"I used both at the same time."

"Huh?" Sylph inclined his head even further. "How can you chant two things at the same time?"

Crap. I'd given myself away. He was right, of course, it was impossible to chant two incantations at once. "Uh, well, you create the Waterfall without doing the incantation and use Heat Hand to warm it up. I think you could chant one of the spells if you wanted, and you could also put the water into a bucket and then heat it up after."

I then demonstrated casting both spells without the incantations. Sylph watched me with wide eyes. Silent spellcasting was clearly a very high-level technique in this world. Roxy wasn't able to do it, and I'd heard that only one of the instructors at the University of Magic was capable of it. Sylph was better off using Combined Magic than trying the no-incantations route. I figured that would let someone achieve very similar effects without having to do something so difficult.

"Hey, teach me how to do that," Sylph said.

"How to do what?"

"How to do magic without saying anything." Apparently, Sylph had a different opinion from me. Maybe he saw the ability to do something in one go as better than alternating between two spells?

Hmm. I supposed that if teaching him that wound up being futile, he could just use Combined Magic, anyway.

"Right. So, you know the feeling you get when you're going through the incantation for a spell? That feeling throughout your body that collects in your fingertips? Try doing that without saying the incantation. Once you feel like you've got the magical energy gathered up, let the spell you want to cast come to your mind and then force it out through your hands. Try to do

something like that. Start with something like Waterball." I hoped that got the point across. I wasn't good at explaining things.

Sylph closed his eyes and began muttering and murmuring as he did a weird, wriggly little dance. Trying to convey something you did through feelings was really hard. Silent incantation was something you did in your head; different people probably had different methods that worked for them.

Figuring that fundamentals were important, I'd had Sylph use incantations the entire past year. Maybe the more you used incantations, the harder it was to go without. It'd be like trying to use your left hand to do something you'd always done with your right; suddenly being told to switch was easier said than done.

"I did it! Rudy, I did it!"

Okay. Maybe not, then.

Sylph beamed with pride after managing to conjure a series of Waterballs. He'd been using incantations before, but it had only been a year, I suppose. I guessed this was like removing the training wheels from a bicycle. Perhaps it was a matter of youthful perspicacity? Or maybe Sylph had an innate talent?

"Good! Now, try casting the spells you've learned so far without chanting the incantations."

"Okay!"

Besides, if he was able to skip the incantation part, it would make it easier for me to teach him. I'd just be able to explain things the way I already did them myself.

I felt a few drops of rain. "Hm?" I looked up and saw that, at some point, the sky had been overtaken by a dark bank of rainclouds. A moment later, the rain started pelting down. Normally, I watched the skies to make sure we'd be able to get home before it started raining, but today I'd been distracted by Sylph's learning silent spellcasting, and I'd slipped up.

"Oh, wow. This is some pretty bad rain," I said.

"Rudy, I know you can make it rain, but can you also make it stop?"

"I can, but we're already soaking wet, and without rain, the crops aren't going to grow. I make a point not to mess with the weather unless it's

going to cause problems."

We were already off and running by then. Since Sylph's house was too far away, we made for the Greyrat estate.

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"I'm home!" I called out.

"Uh, h-hello," Sylph added.

Our maid, Lilia, was standing just inside, waiting with a large cloth in hand. "Welcome back, young Master Rudeus, and your…friend," she said. "I've already drawn some warm water for you. Please wash up and dry off on the second floor so that you don't catch a cold. The lord and lady of the house will be home soon, so I'll go get ready to tend to them. Will you be all right on your own?"

"Yes, I'll be fine," I said. Lilia must have seen the downpour and expected I'd come home soaking wet. She was a woman of few words, and didn't speak to me very much, but she was quite the talented maid. I didn't have to explain anything; she took one look at Sylph's face, headed back into the house, and came back with another large cloth for him.

The two of us took off our shoes, then dried off our heads and our bare feet before heading upstairs. Entering my room, I saw that a bucket filled with warm water had been set out. In this world, we didn't have showers, or bathtubs even, so this was how we cleaned up. According to Roxy, there were hot springs where people could bathe, but as someone who wasn't fond of bathing in the first place, this method was fine by me.

I undressed until I was fully naked, and then saw Sylph fidgeting awkwardly, his face blushing bright red.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "You need to get out of your clothes or you'll catch a cold."

"Huh? Oh, y-yeah…" But still, he didn't move.

Was he shy about getting naked in front of someone? Or maybe he'd never undressed himself before? I mean, he was only six. "Here," I said, "lift

up both your hands."

"Um, okay." I helped Sylph lift his hands overhead, then peeled off his sopping wet coat, exposing his stark white skin, along with his lack of muscular definition.

I reached for his lower garments next, but he grabbed hold of my arm. "N-no, not that," he muttered. Was he embarrassed about me seeing him? I was like that, too, when I was little. Back in kindergarten, we'd have to get naked and shower when it was time to swim in the pool, but it was always a little awkward being exposed to people in the same age bracket.

In any case, Sylph's hand was freezing. He really was going to catch a cold if we didn't hurry. I grabbed his trousers and forcefully pulled them down.

"H-hey, stop it…" he squeaked, hitting me on the head as I took hold of his baggy children's underpants.

I looked up and he was gazing fixedly down at me, tears in his eyes. "I promise I'm not going to laugh," I assured him.

"Th-that's not—erf!"

He was being quite obstinate. In all the time I'd known him, Sylph had never so staunchly refused to do something. I was a little shocked. Did elves maybe have some rule about not being seen naked? If that was the case, trying to forcibly strip him was a bad call.

"All right, all right," I said. "Just make sure to change after we're done. Wet underpants are pretty gross, and once they get cold, you'll wind up with stomach problems."

I removed my hands, and Sylph gave me a teary-eyed nod. "Mmf…"

He was so cute. I wanted to get even closer to this adorable boy.

And as I thought that, my mischievous streak suddenly sprang to the fore. After all, it was hardly fair that I was the only one naked.

"Gotcha!" I snatched hold of his underwear with my hands, then yanked them down in one fell swoop. Come to me, Zenra Pendulum!

Sylph shrieked. A moment later, he squatted and curled up into himself to hide his body from sight—but in that moment, what flashed before my eyes was not the pure short sword to which I'd grown recently accustomed; nor, naturally, was it a dark blade bearing ominous sigils.

No, what was there—rather, what *wasn't* there—was, well, replaced by something that *shouldn't* have been there. It was something I'd seen many times over in my past life, on my computer monitor. Sometimes it was covered with a pixelated mosaic; other times it was uncensored. I'd stare, always thinking about how much I wanted to lick and be inside the real thing someday, my dark lust inevitable causing my white cannon to hit the mark on a handful of tissues.

One of those. That's what Sylph had.

He…was a *she*.

My vision went white. What I'd just done was not okay at all.

***

"Rudeus, what are you doing?"

I came to my senses to see Paul standing there. When had he gotten home? Had he come into the room because he'd heard Sylph cry out?

I stood petrified; Paul did likewise. There was Sylph, hunched and curled up, naked and sobbing. There I was, also naked, with her underpants clutched in my hand.

There was no talking my way out of this one.

It was raining just outside, but it sounded so very far away.

Paul

I came home after work to find my son assaulting the young girl that he always liked spending time with.

I wanted to tear into him on the spot, but I managed to stay level. Maybe this was another case where there were circumstances I wasn't aware of. I didn't want to repeat my previous failure. For now, I decided to put the sobbing girl in the care of my wife and the maid while I helped my son clean up and dry off.

"Why were you doing something like that?" I asked.

"I'm sorry."

When I'd scolded him a year earlier, he seemed completely unwilling to apologize, but now the apology came right out and he turned meek, shriveling up like sautéed spinach. "I asked you for a reason," I said.

"Well, they were soaking wet. I figured I should take them off."

"But she didn't like that, did she?"

"No…"

"I told you to be nice to girls, didn't I?"

"You did. I'm sorry."

Rudeus had no excuse for himself. I wondered if I'd been the same at his age. I felt like whatever I might have said would have been full of "buts" and "you sees." I'd had an excuse for everything when I was a kid. My son was more honest than that.

"Well, I suppose that, at your age, it's natural to want to pick on girls, but you can't do that."

"I know. I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Something about seeing my boy so utterly dejected made me feel guilty. That fondness for women came from me. When I was little, I was full of youthful vigor and virility, and incessantly chased after cute girls who caught my eye. I managed to keep myself more subdued these days, but I really couldn't restrain myself in the past. Maybe I'd passed that on to my son.

Of course an intellectual boy like him would struggle with these instincts. How hadn't I noticed it? But no— this wasn't the time to sympathize with him. I needed to give him proper guidance based on my experiences.

“Don’t apologize to me,” I said. “You need to apologize to Sylphiette. Right?”

“Is Sylph…iette going to forgive me?”

“You don’t apologize just because you hope to be forgiven right away.” At this, my boy looked even more despondent. In hindsight, it was clear he’d been infatuated with the girl from the very beginning. The whole fuss from a year ago was because he’d decided to protect her. And all he’d gotten for it was a smack from his old man.

Even after that, they’d played together almost every day, my son protecting her from the other kids. He had to keep up with both sword and magic training, but still made as much time for her as he could. He was so close to her that I think he even offered to give her his wand and magic textbook, which he valued more than anything.

I understood why he was feeling so glum at the idea that she might hate him now. I’d dealt with similar rejection in my day.

“Hey, it’ll be all right,” I said. “If you’ve never been mean to her before this, and if your apology comes from the heart, I’m sure she’ll forgive you.”

My son’s face brightened at that, if only a tiny bit. He was a smart kid; he’d messed up this time, but he’d recover from it soon enough. Hell, maybe he’d find a way to turn this around completely and win her heart. It was both a promising and foreboding prospect.

Rudeus stood up from the bath, looked to Sylphiette, and opened with: “I’m sorry, Sylphie. Your hair’s short, and so I thought you were a boy this whole time!”

I’d always thought our son was perfect, but maybe he was a lot dumber than I’d thought. And that was the first time I’d ever thought that.

Rudeus

After a lot of apologies, compliments, and reassurances, I got her to

forgive me somehow.

Since it turned out Sylph was a girl, I figured I'd call her "Sylphie" from now on. Apparently, her full name was Sylphiette? Paul looked at me as if he were dumbfounded by how I ever mistook such a cute little thing for a boy. But I never expected Sylphie would actually turn out to be a girl.

I suppose it really wasn't my fault. When we first met, her hair was shorter than mine. Like, not cut "fashionably" short or anything, but also not so short that she looked like a monk or something. She'd also never dressed in anything that looked like girls' clothing—just a plain shirt and trousers. If she'd worn a skirt, I wouldn't have made that mistake.

Okay. I needed to calm down and think. She'd been getting bullied because of the color of her hair. Maybe that was why she'd cut it so short—so it wouldn't stand out as much. And if bullies came after her, her only option was to run fast as she could, which would explain why she wore trousers instead of a skirt. Sylphie's family didn't seem particularly well-off, so after making her a pair of trousers, they probably couldn't afford to make her a skirt, too.

If I'd met her three years from now, I wouldn't have mistaken her for a boy. I only thought she was a cute boy because of my own preconceptions, not because she was androgynous or anything like that. Like, if she'd—

No, enough with that. Anything I said now would just be an excuse.

Learning that Sylphie was a girl changed my attitude. Seeing her in her boyish getup made me feel kind of weird.

"You're really cute, Sylphie," I said. "Maybe you should try growing your hair out?"

"Huh?"

I figured it'd be easier for me to see her in a new light if she changed her appearance, hence the suggestion. Sylphie may have hated her hair, but that emerald green color would look dazzling in the sunlight. I definitely wanted her to try growing it out—and, if possible, for her to style it in either pigtails or a ponytail.

"No…" she said.

Ever since that incident, Sylphie had been wary of me. In particular, she conspicuously avoided physical contact. Since she always went along with whatever I'd proposed, I was kind of shocked.

"All right," I said. "Did you want to practice some more silent spellcasting today?"

"Sure."

I forced a smile to mask my feelings. Sylphie was my only friend. At least we could still play together. There might be some lingering awkwardness, but at least we were still hanging out together.

For today, I told myself, that would be good enough.

***

My skills, according to this world's standards, were as follows:

Swordplay

Sword God Style: Beginner; Water God Style: Beginner

Attack Magic

Fire: Advanced; Water: Saint; Wind: Advanced; Earth: Advanced

Healing Magic

Healing: Intermediate; Detoxification: Beginner

Healing magic was divided into the same seven ranks as usual, and comprised four schools: Healing, Protection, Detoxification, and Divine Strike. But these schools didn't come with cool-sounding titles like Fire Saint or Water Saint; you were simply called a Saint-tier Healing caster, or a Saint-tier Detoxification caster.

Healing magic, as the name implied, was used to heal injuries.

Beginners would expend most of their effort simply to close up wounds, but it was said that people at the Imperial level could regrow lost limbs. But not even someone at the Divine level could bring a dead creature back to life.

Detoxifying magic helped to purge poisons and disease. At higher levels, one could create toxins, craft antidotes, and the like. Spells that dealt with abnormal status effects were all Saint-level or higher, and were apparently quite difficult.

Protection magic included spells to increase one's defenses and create barriers. In simple terms, it was a form of support magic. I wasn't too clear on the details, but my understanding was that it included things like increasing your metabolism to heal minor wounds, or generating chemicals in the brain to numb you to pain. Roxy couldn't use that kind of magic.

Spells in the Divine Strike school were apparently very effective at doing damage to ghost-type monsters and wicked demons, but such spells were the secret purview of human Priest Warriors. Not even the University of Magic taught this school. Roxy couldn't use this kind, either.

I'd never seen a ghost before, but apparently, they existed in this world?

It was rather inconvenient that you couldn't silently cast a spell without understanding the theory behind it. Elemental Attack magic, for instance, worked on scientific principles. I wasn't sure what principles, if any, applied to other spell types. I knew magic was like some kind of all-powerful element, but I didn't know how to rework it into doing just anything.

Take psychokinesis, for example: the ability to make objects float and come to your hand and all that stuff. Even if I thought that was something that could be reproduced with magic, I had no way of finding out how to reproduce the effect, since I'd never had psychic powers.

In the same vein, I remembered very, very little about how wounds healed, so I didn't think I could do Healing magic without incantations. If I had a doctor's know-how, I bet it would be a different story.

Beyond that, though, I was pretty sure I could reproduce most other effects through spells. Hey, maybe if I'd participated in sports, I'd have been better at my swordplay.

In retrospect, maybe I had wasted way too much of my past life.

No. It wasn't a waste. Sure, I didn't have a job or go to school, but it wasn't like I'd spent the whole time hibernating. I'd immersed myself in all sorts of video games and hobbies while everyone else was busy with things like studying or working. And all the knowledge, experience, and perspectives I'd gained from those games would be useful in this world.

Or, well, they ought to be. They hadn't really been, so far.

***

One day, I was outside doing sword training with Paul when I unwittingly let out a loud sigh.

I thought my father would be angry with me for being so obviously out of breath, but he flashed a grin instead.

"Hehehe. What's the matter, Rudy?" he asked. "Feeling down because Sylphiette doesn't like you?"

That wasn't what I'd sighed about, though. Granted, Sylphie was one of the things weighing on my mind.

"Well, yeah. Sword practice isn't going so well, Sylphie is mad at me —yeah, I sighed."

Paul grinned again and thrust his wooden practice sword into the ground. He leaned against it and looked directly at me. *Oh, please tell me he's not about to make fun of me…*

"Want some advice from your dad?"

I hadn't expected that. I thought about it some. Paul— my dad—was a popular guy with the ladies. Zenith was definitely what you'd call beautiful, plus there was the whole thing with Mrs. Eto. Sometimes he'd touch Lilia's butt, and the look on her face suggested she didn't mind at all. He had to have something: *some* way to keep girls from hating you.

Granted, Paul was more the kind of person who acted on intuition, so I wasn't sure I'd understand him, but if nothing else, it'd be food for thought. "Yes, please," I told him.

"Hmm. How to put this…?"

“Should I go and lick her boots?”

“No, that’s—wow, you got all servile all of a sudden.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll let Mother know how you were making eyes at Lilia.”

“This is a very high-pressure situ—whoa, hey! You saw that?” Paul balked. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry for acting high-and-mighty.”

I’d only mentioned Lilia to bait the conversation into going my way, but…was he actually having an affair? I mean, if he was, then hey, whatever. That was all part and parcel of being a ladies’ man. I’d have to ask him how to play the part properly.

“Listen, Rudy,” he said. “So, about women…”

“Yeah?”

“They like things about men that make them strong, but they also like some of our softer aspects.”

“Ohh.” I’d heard as much before. Did that have something to do with maternal instincts or whatever?

“Now, you’ve only been showing Sylphiette the things that make you strong, haven’t you?”

“Maybe? I haven’t really noticed one way or the other.”

“Think about it,” Paul said. “If someone clearly stronger than you came at you with their intentions for you on full display, how would you feel?”

“Scared, I guess?”

“Exactly.” I could only assume he was talking about what had happened on that day—the day I’d learned “he” was a she. “That’s why you need to show her your softer aspects, too. Use your strengths to protect her, and she’ll protect your weaknesses. That’s how you keep a relationship going.”

“Ohh!” That was simple to understand! I didn’t think a vague guy like Paul was capable of such an explanation!

You couldn’t just be strong, but you also couldn’t just be weak. Only by being a little of both could you pull in the girls.

“But how do I show her where I’m weak?” I asked.

“That’s simple. You’re worried about stuff right now, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Take what you’re bottling up and share it with Sylphiette. Say ‘I’ve got a lot of stuff wearing me down, and having you avoid me is making me worry,’ or something along those lines.” Paul flashed a broad grin. It was an unsettling look. “If things go well, she’ll bridge the gap. She might even console you. So, cheer up. You’ve got a friend who’ll make things right with you. Anybody would be happy with that.”

“Aha!” Now I got it! I could use my attitude to control other people’s emotions. Of course “B-but, wait, what if things don’t work out?”

“If that happens, come to me. I’ll teach what you do next.”

Wait, this was a multi-stage plan? This guy was a total schemer!

“Oh, okay. I get it. Anyway, I’ll be back!”

“Good luck!” Paul said, with a wave of his hand.

Unable to wait any longer, I dashed off. As I left, I could’ve sworn I heard him say one final thing.

“What the hell did I just teach my six-year-old son?”

***

I got to our spot under the tree earlier than usual, so Sylphie hadn’t shown up yet. I’d brought my wooden practice sword, as always, but I hadn’t cleaned up before heading out like I usually did, so I was all sweaty.

What should I do? There was nothing to be done, really. Times like this, I just had to do mental exercises. I swung my sword around as I ran through some simulations in my head. I’d shown her my strengths. Now I had to show my weaknesses. Weakness. How was I supposed to do that again? Ah, right—let her see that I was feeling down. But how? When was the right time? Should I just come out with it right away? That seemed like it’d be weird. Should I try to work it into the flow of the conversation? Could I do that, though? No—I *would*.

Caught up with thinking about this while idly swinging my sword, I must have loosened my grip, because the sword slipped right out of my hand. “Whoops!” I followed its path as it skittered along the ground, landing right at Sylphie’s feet.

My mind went completely blank. Crap! What should I do? What should I say?!

“What’s the matter, Rudy?” Sylphie was staring at me, her eyes wide. What was the matter? Was it because I’d shown up super early?

“Uhh…hmm…well… Y-you’re… You’re really cute, and I, err… wanted to see you, but, uh…”

“No, not that. The sweat.”

“Hmff… Ahh… S-sweat? Whaddya mean?” I approached, causing her to flinch and recoil. As usual, she wouldn’t let me get within a certain distance of her. It was like we were the same poles of two different magnets.

Sweat dripped off my forehead. My breathing leveled out. Good.

I reached down to pick up the wooden sword in dejection, then struck a remorseful pose, facing away from her. I allowed my shoulders to slump, and let out a heavy sigh. “Man. I feel like you’re really cold lately, Sylphie.”

For a few moments, there was silence. Had I done okay? Did I do it right, Paul? Should I have made myself even more vulnerable? Or was I being too obvious?

“Ah!”

Suddenly, something grabbed my hand from behind. The sensation was warm and soft, and I looked to see Sylphie there.

Oho! She was close. Sylphie hadn’t gotten this close to me in a long while. Paul! I did it!

“You know, Rudy, you’ve been acting really strange recently,” she said, her face a touch lonesome as she said it.

That snapped me back to my senses. I mean, she was right. She didn’t need to say it for me to know that I hadn’t been treating her the same way I had before. From Sylphie’s perspective, this change must have come completely out of nowhere. As sudden a switch as the moment a young

woman who's looking for marriage prospects discovers you've got a fair bit of money.

I wasn't acting like this because I enjoyed it. But how else was I supposed to deal with her? I couldn't well treat her the same way I had before. There was no way I wouldn't be nervous around a cute girl like her.

A cute, young girl around my age. I hadn't the foggiest how to be friends with someone like that.

If I'd been an adult, or Sylphie more grown up, I could have used my knowhow of adult visual novels. If she were a boy, I could have leveraged the experiences from my past life when my brother was younger. If I'd been an adult, or Sylphie more grown up, I could have gotten by with my knowledge of adult dating sims. But she was a girl my age. And sure, I'd played games where you could romance girls around her age, but besides, that wasn't even the sort of relationship I wanted with her. We were both way too young.

Well, for the time being, anyway. I definitely had high hopes for the future!

All that aside, this was a girl who had been bullied. Back when I'd been bullied, I didn't have anyone on my side. So, I wanted to be there for her. Boy or girl—it didn't matter. That much hadn't changed. Still, treating her the same way was just too hard. I was a boy, and I wanted to forge a good relationship with a cute girl.

But, like, for later on!

Ugh. I just didn't know what to do. Maybe I should have asked Paul about this, too.

"I'm sorry," Sylphie said. "But Rudy, I don't hate you."

"S-Sylphie…" I must have had a pathetic look on my face, because she patted my head. Then, Sylphie flashed me a wonderful, carefree smile. It was so soft.

I was moved almost to the point of tears.

I had clearly been in the wrong, but she was the one who'd apologized. I took her hand and gripped it tightly in mine. Her face blushed red with surprise even as she gazed at me and said, "So, could you please just act

normal?" Those upturned eyes of hers added weight to her words.

Hidden away within me was the power I needed to make this decision. And so, I did.

That's right. What she hoped for was normalcy. A relationship the same as the one we'd always had. So, to the best of my ability, I would treat her normally, and do my best not to frighten or fluster her.

In other words…I would become one of them. I supposed I might as well.

It was time to be an oblivious protagonist.

Chapter 9:
Emergency Family Meeting

Zenith had learned she was pregnant. I was going to have a little brother or sister. Our family was growing. Oh, Rudy, you lucky guy!

For a few years now, Zenith had been worried about her inability to conceive another child. I'd heard her mutter and sigh on occasion about how maybe she couldn't bear children anymore, but about a month earlier, there was a shift in her food cravings, along with nausea, vomiting, and a general sense of fatigue—in other words, symptoms of classic morning sickness. The feelings were familiar, and a trip to the doctor confirmed that her self-diagnosis was almost certainly correct.

The Greyrat household was abuzz at the announcement. What will we name the baby if it's a boy? What will we name it if it's a girl? We still have rooms, right? Oh, we can use Rudy's old clothes and hand-me-downs. There was no end to the topics to be discussed.

It was a day of bubbling joy and countless smiles. I was honestly very happy, hoping that I'd wind up with a little sister. A younger brother might break all of my precious things (with a baseball bat).

The problems didn't arise until about a month later.

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Our maid, Lilia, had discovered that she was pregnant, as well.

"I'm so sorry," she announced matter-of-factly to the family as we sat at the table. "I'm pregnant."

In that instant, the Greyrat family froze. *Who was the father?* But, given the circumstances, nobody could bring themselves to ask.

Everyone had realized it on some level at least. Lilia was our maid. She sent almost all of her pay back home to her family. Unlike Paul, who frequently headed into town to help settle problems, or Zenith, who helped

out at the local clinic at certain times, Lilia almost never left the house unless it was on work-related duties, and nobody had heard rumors about her developing an especially close relationship with anyone. Perhaps it had been a casual fling?

I knew the truth, though.

Ever since Zenith had gotten pregnant, Paul had been forced to go without sex. And he was an especially lustful man who'd been sneaking into Lilia's room in the middle of the night. If I'd been an actual kid, I would have thought they were just playing cards or something.

Unfortunately, I knew all too well what was really going on. They weren't playing any game of Old Maid; there was playing around, and there was a maid involved, but this was no mere round of cards.

Still, I wish they'd been more careful. Which is probably what both of them were thinking, too.

Hello, boys and girls! The phrase of the day is "You can do it!" Today we'll be learning all about the importance of contraception!

Part of me wanted to say that to Paul with a completely deadpan face, but I wasn't sure if the concept of contraception was even a thing in this world. And obviously it wasn't like I wanted to tear the whole family apart by spilling the beans. Also, if I messed with the maid, I was pretty sure she'd never forgive me.

Besides, I owed Paul for helping me through that incident with Sylphie. I'd let this one slide. Being a guy who all the chicks were hot for seemed tough. If they suspected him, I'd cover for him. Heck, I'd lie to give him an alibi if I had to.

Having come to that decision, I looked over at Paul, letting him know with my eyes that he had nothing to worry about.

At the same time, however, Zenith shot a look right over at Paul, her shocked assumption plain on her face.

Conveniently enough, our gazes both fell upon Paul as one, bearing down on him.

"Uh, sorry," he blurted. "This child is, uh…probably mine."

Good grief. Really? Well, no; I suppose I should commend the man for

being honest. Seeing as how he constantly told me to “be honest” and “be a real man” and “be sure to protect women” and “never impugn your sense of honor” and other high-and-mighty stuff like that day in and day out, the least he could do was practice what he preached.

Well, whatever. I couldn’t say I hated him for it.

Anyway, this really was the worst-case scenario. That sentiment solidified as I watched Zenith draw herself up to her full height, her face livid, her hand rising into the air.

And thus was convened an emergency family meeting, with Lilia included.

***

It was Zenith who first broke the silence. She had the authority in this meeting. “So, what are we going to do?”

From what I could see, she was as calm as anything. Instead of going into a fit of hysterics over how her husband had cheated on her, she’d contented herself with a single smack. A red mark like a maple leaf spread across Paul’s cheek.

“After I’ve assisted with the lady of the house’s birth,” Lilia said, “I assume I would take my leave from your home.”

She seemed rather composed, too. Maybe this was a common occurrence in this world? The maid becomes her employer’s mistress; if people object, she just leaves the house.

A pitiful story like that would normally turn me on, but under the circumstances, I didn’t so much as twitch. I still had principles. Unlike Paul.

Paul was all huddled up in a corner. So much for paternal dignity.

“What about the child?” Zenith asked.

“I was thinking I would give birth here in Fittoa, and then raise the baby back in my hometown,” Lilia replied.

“You’re originally from the south, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“You’re going to be physically exhausted after the birth,” Zenith said. “You’ll be in no condition to make a long journey.”

“Perhaps so, but I have nowhere else to turn.”

The Fittoa Region was in the northeastern part of the Asura Kingdom. Based on my understanding, to reach what was considered “the south” in this context took close to a month and required switching between multiple stagecoaches. Still, that was a month traveling through safe lands with good weather, and riding in stagecoaches wasn’t terribly arduous.

That, however, was for a typical traveler. Lilia had no money. She couldn’t afford to ride on stagecoaches, and would have go on foot. Even if the Greyrats paid for her travel expenses, that didn’t make it any less risky. She’d be a woman, traveling by herself, having recently given birth. If I were a bad guy and spotted her, what would I do?

I would attack her. She was an obvious sitting duck, practically begging for someone to take a shot at her. Take the child hostage, keep the mother distracted with empty promises. Meanwhile, take all her money and possessions. I’d gathered that slavery was a thing in this world, so in the end, I’d sell off both mother and child, and that would be that.

Even if people said that the Asura Kingdom was the safest nation in the world, that didn’t mean it was completely devoid of evildoers. I bet there was still a high likelihood of them being attacked.

And like Zenith had said, there was also the physical aspect to consider. Even if Lilia did have the stamina to make it, what about the child? Could a newborn handle a month-long journey like that? Probably not.

Of course, if Lilia didn’t survive the journey, neither would the child. Even if she simply fell ill, if she didn’t have money to see a doctor, she was done for. I suddenly had the mental image of Lilia lying dead in the midst of a blizzard, baby cradled in her arms. I, for one, didn’t want to see her suffer that sort of fate.

“Dear,” Paul started to stay, “surely she could just sta—”

“You keep your mouth shut!” Zenith snapped, cutting him off.

He shrank like a scolded child. This was definitely one instance where

he had no right to speak. Paul was useless here.

Zenith chewed on her nails with a look of consternation. She was clearly conflicted as well. She didn't want Lilia to suffer; on the contrary, the two were quite good friends. Considering how they'd spent the last six years running this household together, it was probably fair to say they were best friends.

Well, except for the part about how Lilia was now carrying Paul's child.

If Lilia had gotten pregnant because she was raped in some back alley, Zenith would have unquestionably sheltered her, and allowed her to—no, she would have *insisted* she raise the child in our home.

Based on the conversation, I surmised that abortion wasn't easily accessible in this world.

Zenith appeared to be grappling with two separate emotions: her fondness for Lilia and her feelings of betrayal. Considering the circumstances, I thought Zenith was pretty incredible for being able to set aside her emotions about the latter. If I were her, I'd have given in to jealousy.

The fact that Zenith was able to keep her cool seemed connected to Lilia's own attitude; she hadn't tried to talk her way out of anything, and had taken full responsibility for betraying a household she'd served for so long.

If you asked me, though, it was Paul who ought to be taking responsibility here. It was weird to lay the blame solely on Lilia. Very, very weird.

I couldn't allow us to part on such weird terms.

I decided that I was going to help Lilia.

I was indebted to her. We didn't do very much together, and she hardly ever talked to me, but she'd always been there, helping out. She set aside a towel for me to wipe away the sweat when I was practicing my swordplay; she drew me a bath when I got caught in the rain; she fetched me blankets on chilly nights; she rearranged the shelves when I put a book back in the wrong space.

But most importantly, more than anything else—

She knew about my treasured panties and had kept silent about it.

Yes, Lilia knew about those. This happened back when I still thought Sylphie was a boy. It had been raining, and so I was up in my room reading and reviewing my botanical encyclopedia when Lilia came in and started to clean up. I was so engrossed in reading that I didn't notice when her cleaning took her close to my secret hiding place on the shelf. By the time I did realize, it was too late; Lilia already had my precious panties in her hand.

I'd been so stupid. For nearly twenty years I'd been a complete shut-in, leaving my stuff scattered around, unconcerned about anyone else stumbling across it. I even had my folder for porn right on my desktop. Maybe my skill for hiding things had gotten rusty because of that, but I hadn't expected my stuff would be found this easily. I'd actually done a pretty decent job of hiding it, too! Was this a superpower that maids had?

Deep inside myself, I'd felt something start to crumble. I could hear the blood beginning to drain from my head.

The questioning began.

Lilia asked, "What are these?"

I replied, "Yeah, what are those? Ahahahahahah."

Lilia said, "They smell."

I replied, "Y-yeah, I think it's maybe like sesame oil or something like that maybe, yeah?"

Lilia asked, "Whose are these?"

I replied, "I'm sorry…they're Roxy's."

Lilia asked, "Shouldn't you have them laundered?"

I replied, "Oh, no, don't wash them!"

Lilia wordlessly returned my prized panties back to their sacred hiding place. Then, as I quivered in fear, she left the room.

That evening, I braced myself for the inevitable family meeting—except it never came. I spent the long night shuddering fearfully in my futon, but even when morning came, there was nothing. She hadn't told anyone.

I owed it to her to repay that debt.

***

"Mother?" I asked, keeping my tone as childlike as I could. "How come everyone's acting so glum about how I'm going to have two new siblings at once?"

I wanted to give off the naïve impression of: *Hey, if Lilia's pregnant, that means our family's getting even bigger! Hooray! Why's everyone so upset about that?*

"Because your father and Lilia did something they shouldn't have," Zenith said with a sigh, an unfathomable rage mixed in with those words. But it wasn't directed at Lilia; Zenith knew full well who bore the brunt of the blame here.

"Oh, I see," I said. "But is Lilia allowed to go against Father's wishes?"

"What do you mean by that?" Zenith asked.

This wasn't fair to Paul, but hey, he was reaping what he'd sown, here. I'd have to single-handedly try to cover up for Lilia's indiscretions. My bad, Paul. I'd have repay him for Sylphie some other time.

"Well, I know that Father has some leverage over her."

"What? Is this true?" Zenith said, looking over at Lilia in surprise.

Lilia was as stone-faced as ever, though she did raise a curious eyebrow, as if my assertion had been on the mark. Did Paul actually have something on her? Based on the usual stuff I'd heard and seen, it seemed more likely to me that Lilia had something on Paul, but…

No, never mind. I had my opening here. "A while ago, I got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, and as I was passing by Lilia's room, I heard Father say something like… 'If you don't want me to tell anyone, spread your legs!'"

"Huh?!" Paul blurted. "Dammit, Rudy, what the hell are—"

"You shut up!" Zenith snapped, putting him in check. "Lilia, is this true?"

Lilia's gaze wandered. "Um, so, well, actually…"

Was I actually on the mark? Or was she just playing along?

"Ah, I see," Zenith replied, seeming to come to an understanding of things. "You can't bring yourself to say it out loud."

Paul's eyes blinked over and over, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly like a goldfish's, no words coming out. Perfect. Time to wrap this all up.

"Mother, I don't think Lilia is to blame."

"I suppose not."

"I think Father is to blame."

"I suppose so."

"It isn't right that Lilia is in such a hard position because of something that was Father's fault."

"Mmm. I suppose."

My mother's responses were more noncommittal than I'd hoped. I just needed to push a little further. "I have fun playing with Sylphie every day, so I think it'll be really nice that my little brother or sister will have someone the same age to be friends with!"

"I…suppose, yes."

"And besides, Mother, they'd both be little brothers or sisters to me!"

"All right, Rudy. I get it. You win." Zenith let out a heavy sigh.

Jeez, way to give me a hard time about it, Mom.

"Lilia, I insist you stay with us," Zenith pronounced. "You're family at this point! I am not letting you do something as foolish as leave!"

And that seemed to be the final word on the matter. Paul's eyes went wide; Lilia brought her hand to her mouth, holding back her tears.

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All right, then. That was all done and settled.

***

And so, with all of the responsibility laid squarely on Paul, we got through things without further issue. By the end, Zenith was looking at him with the cold dispassion of someone who was about to slaughter a pig. My balls tensed up in anticipation of what punishment she might unleash upon him. With that look still in her eyes, though, Zenith simply returned to her room.

Lilia was crying, her face blank and expressionless, but tears streamed from her eyes. Paul looked conflicted about whether he should put his arms around her or not. For the time being, I was going to let the playboy do his thing.

I followed after Zenith. If this situation wound up with her and Paul getting divorced, that would create its own host of problems.

I knocked on the bedroom door, and Zenith poked her head out. “Mother,” I said, deciding to just cut right to the chase, “the stuff I said earlier was a lie I just made up. Please don’t hate Father.”

For a moment, Zenith was taken aback, but then she grimaced and gently patted my head. “I know, sweetie. I would never have fallen in love with a man who was that terrible,” she said. “Your father’s got a weakness for women, so I’d prepared myself for the day something like this might happen. It was just a bit sudden, is all.”

“Father has a weakness for women?” I asked, playing ignorant.

“Yes. Not as much in more recent times, but back in the day he was pretty indiscriminate. You might have older brothers and sisters out there that we don’t know about, Rudy.”

She exerted a bit more pressure with the hand that was ruffling my hair.

“Make sure you don’t grow up to be someone like that, okay, Rudy?” She rubbed—no, gripped the top of my head even more firmly. “Make sure

you treat Sylphie real nice, okay, Rudy?"

"Ah, ow! Of course, Mother! Th-that hurts!" It almost felts like she'd nailed down what I was going to go on to do in the future.

Still, things would be all right if they stayed like this. Where they went from here—that was all on Paul now.

Still, it was tough knowing that my dad was such a damn hedonist. No more second chances from me, señor.

The day after that, sword practice was exceedingly rough.

I was able to keep pace with him and all; I just wished he wouldn't take it out on me like that.

Lilia

I'll just come out and say it: I was the one who seduced Paul.

I had no intention of doing such a thing when I first came to this house. But to hear them moaning night after night, to clean a room that smelled of a man and woman who were very satisfied—I had my needs, and they were building up.

At first, I was able to deal with those needs on my own. Watching Paul practicing swordplay in the yard every morning, however, stoked the fire inside me that had never completely died.

Watching him reminded me of our first time. We were still so young, back when he was staying at the training hall where we practiced. Paul snuck into my room at night and forcibly had his way with me. I didn't dislike him, but I certainly didn't love him back. It wasn't exactly the most romantic encounter. I'd cried, at first.

The next person who made advances toward me, though, was that bald, fat minister. That certainly put into perspective how much better things with Paul had been. Also, when I heard that Paul was hiring a maid, I figured I could use what had happened back then as leverage in my negotiations.

Paul was a much manlier fellow upon our reunion than he'd been back then; any trace of boyishness had disappeared, replaced with the look of a man who'd refined himself both physically and mentally. At the sight of him, one of the first thoughts to cross my mind was that the past six years had certainly been kind to him.

At first, Paul didn't try to make any moves on me. Every so often, though, he'd treat me to a sneaky grope that just got me all the more worked up. I was able to resist, but I was fully aware that I was walking a very thin line.

All of that came crashing down when Zenith got pregnant.

Knowing that Paul had an abundance of libido, I got it in my head that this was my opportunity. I saw my chance, and I invited Paul into my room. So, this really was my own fault. I thought of my own pregnancy as punishment—my punishment for giving in to my lust, and for betraying Zenith.

But I was forgiven. Rudeus forgave me. That clever child, he managed to correctly deduce what had happened, lead the conversation precisely where it needed to go, and even bring things to an elegant compromise. He was so level and calculating about it, as if he had some similar prior experience to go on.

It was an unsettling—no, best to quit while I was still ahead.

Rudeus weirded me out, and so I made a point to avoid him as much as I could. The boy was smart; he probably realized I was avoiding him. Even so, he had saved me. I couldn't imagine that felt good for him, but he chose me and my child over his own feelings.

I would owe him for that for the rest of my life. He was someone who deserved my respect.

Yes, he did deserve it. I would owe him a debt for as long as I lived. So, once the child in my belly was safely born, and once they were grown up, I would see that they made their way into young Master Rudeus's service.

Rudeus

Several months passed without anything especially major happening.

Sylphie was growing remarkably fast. She was now able to cast Intermediate-level spells without incantations, and she was reaching the point where she could pull off some pretty subtle effects. In comparison, my skill with the sword was relatively unchanged. I'd gotten decent, but I hadn't managed to win a single round against Paul so far, so it was difficult to get too excited about my progress.

Lilia's attitude had softened as well. Previously, she'd always been on her guard around me—but since I'd been messing around with magic since I was a little kid, that was only natural. While nothing had really changed about her lack of overt emotion, I felt her words and her mannerisms now bore an overwhelming sense of reverence for me. I got that she was happy about my help, but I wished she'd tone it down.

If nothing else, ever since that incident, Lilia had begun to talk to me a little—mostly old stories about Paul. Apparently, they had both studied swordplay at the same training hall many years back. She told me things, like how Paul had been very talented back then, but hated to practice. Or how Paul would skip training in order to gallivant around town. Or how Paul had forced himself on her in the middle of the night and taken her virtue. Or how Paul had eventually fled the training hall.

Bit by bit, Lilia opened up to me about all that. The more she told me about the past, the more my opinion of Paul dropped. He was a rapist and a cheater. He was trash.

Still, it wasn't like he was rotten to the core. He was childish, irresponsible, and something about that seemed to tickle women's maternal instincts. He tried to be a good, strict father to me, but he wasn't good at keeping up that facade; when he set his mind to it, he mostly just came across as frank and straightforward, and I knew for sure he wasn't a bad guy through and through.

"C'mon, look at me," Paul said, pulling me out of my daze. We were in the middle of sword practice. "Don't you want to grow up to be a cool guy like your dad?"

The nerve of this guy, honestly.

“Is it cool to be a guy who cheats on his wife and risks tearing his family apart?”

“Ngh…” Paul grimaced.

At the look on his face, I resolved to be a bit more careful. I was supposed to be young and oblivious. I didn’t cheat on anyone—girls could come to me of their own accord. That’s how I’d handle things.

“Look,” I said, “if that bothers you so much to hear, could you please keep your hands off of anyone who isn’t Mother?”

“O-other than Lilia, right?”

This man had learned nothing.

“Next time, Mother might move back in with her family without saying a word, you know.”

“Guh.”

Was this guy hoping to build himself a harem? To have some secret retirement out in the sticks, where he had a beautiful wife, a maid he could get handsy with whenever he wanted, and a son to train in the way of the sword?

Huh. That made me kind of jealous. That was probably the best ending from his perspective. It’d be like winding up with both Louise and Siesta at the end of that one light novel series. Maybe, rather than being oblivious, I should try to learn from his example?

No, calm down. I remembered the look in Zenith’s eyes when that family meeting of ours came to a close. Did I want someone to give *me* that look? One wife would be plenty, thanks.

“I mean, you’re a guy,” Paul said. “You know how it is.” He was still refusing to back down.

I knew what he meant, but that didn’t mean I agreed with him. “What would a six-year-old boy know?”

“Well, take Sylphie; you’re into her, aren’t you? She’s going to be gorgeous when she grows up.”

Well, I sure couldn’t disagree with him there. “I guess you’re right. Though I think she’s pretty cute right now.”

“So then you do understand.”

“I guess.”

Yeah, Paul was trash, but we seemed to be on the same level here. I might look like a child, but mentally, I was an unemployed bum over forty years old. A classic example of trash, right there.

When it came to video games, if nothing else, I was fond of girls, and loved harems. Perhaps, on an intrinsic level, I was the same sort of womanizer that Paul was. Maybe the incident where I’d yanked Sylphie’s underwear off was where we’d started to see eye-to-eye. Ever since then, I’d felt like Paul was more willing to compromise, to open up with me. Maybe seeing my weak points had made him lose that drive to be an unreasonably strict father. He was still growing, too.

“Heheheh…”

I looked to see Paul grinning and chuckling. His gaze wasn’t directed at me, but rather behind me. I turned around and saw Sylphie standing there. It was rare of her to come to our house.

On closer inspection, she was blushing ever so slightly, her hands fidgeting. She must have overheard me.

“Go on, repeat what you just said for her,” Paul said.

I let out a tiny snort. I didn’t understand this guy at all.

Guess Paul still had a ways to go. Even heartfelt words eventually lost their impact if you heard them so often you got used to them. Repeating those words now was a no-go. So I just flashed Sylphie a wordless grin and offered her a wave instead.

Besides, Sylphie was only six years old; it was a decade too early for that sort of conversation. If I kept reassuring her over and over that she was cute at this tender age, she’d grow up all conceited and entitled. My older sister from my past life was a prime example of that.

“Um, I mean… I… I think you’re cool, too, Rudy,” she said.

“Oh, yeah? Thanks, Sylphie!” I grinned wide, hoping that my white teeth might shine with a dazzling gleam (though, of course, they didn’t).

Sylphie was excellent at being diplomatic; I nearly mistook that look in

her upturned eyes for sincerity. I'd certainly meant it when I'd said she was cute, but there were no romantic feelings behind that.

Not right now, anyway.

"All right, Father. We're going to head out," I said.

"Don't go rolling around in the hay out there, okay?"

Oh, come on! As if I would! This is me we're talking about, not you.

"Mother!" I started to call. "Father is—"

"Gah! No, stop!"

And so, today our house would be a peaceful one yet again.

***

Soon after that, Zenith gave birth.

It was a rough experience, a breech birth. With Lilia gravid as she was, she called for a midwife from the village, an older woman, but even she said the situation was hopeless. That's how bad it was.

The birth took quite some time, with both mother and child at risk. Lilia put all of her combined knowledge to work, and I assisted by continually casting Healing spells, even though I wasn't great at them.

All told, our efforts worked, and the birth was a success. The baby came safely into this world, letting out its first, healthy cries.

It was a girl. I had a little sister. I was glad it wasn't a little brother.

Our relief was short-lived, however, as Lilia went into labor as well. We were all already exhausted, our guards down. The words "premature birth" flittered through my mind.

This time, however, the midwife was able to play her part. While she might not have been good with breech births, premature births were something she claimed to have experience in. Age really did bring wisdom, sometimes.

I did as the midwife instructed, kicking Paul in the butt to snap him out

of his daze and have him bring Lilia to my room. While he was taking care of that, I used magic to prepare a new bath for the soon-to-be newborn, gathered up all the clean cloths and towels we had, and went back to the midwife.

I let her handle things from there.

The moment the baby was born, Lilia boldly cried out Paul's name. He was at her side, dripping with sweetness, clutching her hand.

The baby was smaller than Zenith's, but let out the same kind of healthy cries all the same. This one was a girl as well. Two daughters. Two little sisters. Paul chuckled sheepishly to himself even as he mused about both of his new children being girls. For the second time that day, I got to see the big, dumb grin of a new parent on his face.

Paul was in an unenviable position, however. The women in our household had now doubled in number. Who was going to wind up on the bottom of the totem pole in that situation? Probably the guy who cheated with the maid and knocked her up. As for me, I was hoping to establish myself as the cool older brother. No way was Paul getting any respect.

Zenith's daughter was named Norn. Lilia's daughter was named Aisha.

Chapter 10:
Stunted Growth

I was now seven years old.

My two little sisters, Norn and Aisha, were growing quickly. They cried when they peed themselves, they cried when they pooped themselves, they cried when they were upset about something, and they cried even when they weren't. They'd cry in the middle of the night, and they'd cry first thing in the morning, and when afternoon rolled around, there'd be some particularly energetic wailing.

Before long, Paul and Zenith were having a shared nervous breakdown. The only one who kept her cool was Lilia. "See!" she said, tending skillfully to the two girls, as she usually did. "Now this is what childrearing is! Things with young Rudeus were much too easy! You could hardly call that *real* childrearing!"

In my case, I was already used to crying babies, thanks to my younger brother from my last life, so it didn't bother me much. And, not to brag, but I had experience in looking after babies—again, thanks to my brother—so I'd briskly change diapers and help out with the laundry and the cleaning. Paul would watch me, looking quite embarrassed for himself. Much like a Japanese man born before World War II, he didn't know how to do anything around the house.

Certainly, his skills with the sword were undeniable, and the people of the town held him in esteem, but he was only half the man he needed to be in order to be a dad.

And this was his second time around, too. Good grief.

***

To help restore some of Paul's honor, here, let me talk some about his more amazing points. Now, I admit that he was a man with plenty of flaws,

and was, in fact, undeniably human garbage. So why do this?

Because he was strong. These were his skills:

Sword God Style: Advanced.

Water God Style: Advanced.

North God Style: Advanced.

Yeah. Advanced in all three schools. To put that into perspective, they said that it took a talented individual a good ten years of dedication to reach the Advanced level in a given school. To put it in kendo terms, it was somewhere around fourth or fifth dan. Intermediate level was somewhere around first through third dan, and was the rank at which someone was considered a full-fledged knight. To reach Saint-level required the skill of someone the equivalent of sixth dan or higher, but that's irrelevant here.

Essentially, Paul possessed skills equivalent to someone who'd reached fourth dan in kendo, judo, and karate—and he'd given up on all of those before finishing his training. He made a poor excuse for an adult, but in terms of strength, the man was a certifiable badass. Moreover, for someone only in his mid-twenties, he had an almost scary amount of real-world combat experience.

That experience had made him both cunning and pragmatic. It was an intuitive thing, so I barely made sense of half of it, but I could tell that he was the real deal. In my two years of training under Paul, I hadn't even broken out of the Beginner level. Maybe that might change after my physique developed more in a few years, but for now, no matter what mental simulations I ran, I couldn't see myself defeating him. Even if I made full use of my spell catalog and tried every dirty trick I could, victory didn't feel within my grasp at all.

I had seen Paul do battle with monsters before.

Actually, it was more accurate to say he showed me. He'd gotten some reports that monsters had turned up, and so he'd dragged me along so I could watch from a distance, saying that "seeing a battle would be a good experience" for me.

And I'll be honest, here: It was pretty damn amazing.

Paul was up against four monsters. Three of them were what we called Assault Dogs, canine monsters that moved about like trained Dobermanns.

The fourth was a bipedal, four-armed porcine monstrosity known as a Terminator Boar. The boar had emerged from within the forest with the three dogs in formation behind him.

Paul handled them with ease, beheading the lot of them in a single stroke.

I'll say it again: It was pretty damn amazing.

His fighting style had a certain beauty to it—a mysterious rhythm that made your heart race, yet put you at ease while watching. I had no good way to explain it, but if I had to boil it down to one word, I'd say it was charisma.

Paul's fighting style had charisma. It earned absolute trust from the men in his command, won Zenith's heart and Lilia's lust, and even stoked the passions of Mrs. Eto. He was the most desirable guy in the whole entire village.

Charisma aside, I was grateful to have Paul around—to have someone more powerful than me so close by. If he hadn't been around, I might have grown up to be an arrogant punk. I would've let my skill in magic convince me to challenge some monsters to a fight, and, unable to handle a pack of Assault Dogs, I'd have wound up getting torn to literal pieces.

And if the monsters didn't do it, people would have. If I'd let my skills go to my head, I'd definitely have picked a fight with someone I couldn't beat. It was a common story, and I'd have deserved whatever came to me, too.

Swordsmen in this world had skills beyond what I was used to. They could run at speeds approaching fifty kilometers per hour, and their reflexes and ability to track movement were quite impressive. Thanks to the existence of Healing magic, death from injury was something that could be staved off, so these swordsmen were practiced in killing their foes in a single stroke. In a world where monsters existed, it only made sense for people to grow so powerful.

Still, even Paul was only at the Advanced level. There were plenty of people higher up the rankings within the official framework alone. And there were enough world-famous individuals and monsters out there that Paul couldn't hope to defeat even if he had backup.

There's always a bigger fish, after all.

I was grateful for Paul teaching me to wield a sword. Other than that, though, he was still no good as a dad. He was like an Olympic gold medalist who also happened to be a convicted criminal.

***

One day, I was working on my sword practice with Paul, as I usually did. Once again, I could tell I wasn't going to beat him that day. I probably wouldn't beat him the day after, either. Lately, I hadn't felt the sense that I was improving at all. Still, if I didn't keep trying, I *definitely* wasn't going to get better.

Besides, even if I wasn't feeling that sense of improvement, my body was still internalizing the practice. Probably. I mean, it had to be, right?

As I was mulling that over, Paul broke the silence.

"By the way, Rudy," he said, as if suddenly remembering something, "about school… No, you probably don't need that. Never mind. Let's get back to it."

He quickly broke off and brought his practice sword to bear, as if nothing had happened.

I wasn't going to let that slide. "What do you mean, school?" I asked.

"There's an educational institution in Roa, the capital of Fittoa, where they teach things like reading and writing, arithmetic, history, etiquette, and that sort of thing."

"I've heard of it."

"Normally, you'd start going there around your age, but…you probably don't need to? You already know how to read and write and do sums, right?"

"Well, yeah."

I let everyone think that Roxy had taught me arithmetic. With two new baby girls, the financial situation at home had gotten rather tough, and with Zenith constantly poring over our accounts ledger, I'd decided to help her out —to her great shock. It had looked like there was going to be another uproar

over what a genius I was, so I'd blurted out Roxy's name to fend that off.

And hey, if that made their estimation of Roxy go up as a result, all the better.

"I'm interested in school, though," I said. "There'd be a lot of other children around my age there, right? Maybe I could make some friends."

Paul swallowed, as if he had a lump in his throat.

"I mean it's not all that great a place. Etiquette is just stuffy nonsense, knowing history doesn't help with anything, and you're definitely going to get bullied. A bunch of local noble brats will be there, sure, but they just get all bitchy whenever they're not number one. With a kid like you there, they'll probably form a clique and push you around. And my father was a marquis, so with you being of even lower standing than I was, you'll be seen as even more of an upstart."

Paul's rundown sounded like it was coming from personal experience. He'd run away from home because he was disgusted by his rigid father and the corrupt nobility. Etiquette and history were an inescapable part of being a proper Asuran noble, so he must have found those subjects tough to tolerate.

An unmistakable tension filled the air between us as we talked. "Really?" I asked. "I would've figured that noblewomen had some pretty cute daughters."

"Let me stop you right there. Noble daughters cake their faces thick with makeup, fuss obsessively over their hairdos, and reek of perfume. I mean, sure, some of them practice swordplay and are hot, but the bulk of them keep their bodies hidden underneath corsets, and even when you do get one into bed and get her clothes off, they never get any exercise, so their bodies are all loose and flabby to boot. Your dad's been tricked many times on that front." Paul had a distant look in his eyes as he spoke.

What a heap of rubbish. Then again, he'd had those experiences and then wound up with a lovely wife like Zenith, so maybe there was something to it.

"Maybe I won't go to school, then," I said. There was still a lot of stuff I wanted to teach Sylphie, for starters. And I'd have to be crazy to go someplace where I knew for sure I'd be bullied. I hadn't been a shut-in for close to twenty years just for show.

“Good call,” Paul said. “If you ever feel like schooling, you can just become an adventurer and go delving in some labyrinths.”

“An adventurer?”

“Yeah. Hitting up labyrinths is great. The ladies there don’t wear makeup, so you can tell at a glance who’s pretty and who’s not. And whether they’re swordswomen or soldiers or wizards, they’re all in great shape.”

Okay, setting the garbage bits of all that aside, based on what I’d read, labyrinths were a kind of monster themselves. They started as simple caverns, but were altered by accumulations of magical energy, transforming them into labyrinths.

At the deepest part of the labyrinth was a magical crystal you could think of as the power source, which was protected by a boss that acted as the guardian. This magical crystal was bait, exuding a powerful, attractive energy. Monsters were drawn in by that energy and made their way into the labyrinth, where they fell victim to traps, starved to death, or were killed by the boss that guarded the crystal; the labyrinth then absorbed the magical essence of those dead monsters.

However, newly formed labyrinths often had their magical crystals devoured by monsters instead, or the crystal was shattered by the cavern collapsing. Hearing that some of them met clumsy ends made them seem all the more like living creatures.

But monsters weren’t the only thing drawn in by these magical crystals. Humans found them quite tempting as well. The crystals could be used as catalysts for certain spells, and they fetched a rather high price. The price went up with size, but even a small one would bring in enough to afford someone a full year of easy living. And while these magical crystals were the only treasures the monsters cared about, that wasn’t the case for humans.

As time passed, the equipment that belonged to the monsters and adventurers that the labyrinth had devoured would grow imbued with magical energy. They became a new sort of bait: magical items.

Magical items differed from magical implements in that they could be used without drawing upon the wielder’s own magical energy. Most magical items, however, didn’t come with useful abilities; the majority of them had powers that were garbage. Still, there was a chance that you might find one

among them that gave the user the abilities of someone who was a Saint-tier magician. Items like this sold for a fortune, and people delved into labyrinths with dreams of striking it rich quick.

The bulk of them fell before they could reach their prize, however, their deaths feeding the labyrinth as it took their magical essence and used it to grow larger and deeper. This was how long-standing labyrinths came to have their depths filled with hoards of treasure.

The oldest and deepest known labyrinth was the Pit of the Dragon God, situated at the foot of the holy Mount Dragoncry in the Red Wyrm mountain range. From what I'd read, it had been around for at least ten thousand years, and was estimated to contain some twenty-five hundred floors.

Apparently, this colossal dungeon was connected to a hole at the pinnacle of Mount Dragoncry itself. By leaping into it, you could presumably plunge right to the very deepest floor, but no one who tried that stunt ever made it back alive.

That "hole" wasn't a volcanic crater or anything, by the way. The labyrinth itself had supposedly created it in order to consume red dragons; when one flew by, the Pit would suck it into its maw.

There wasn't much proof to support that particular myth. But it wouldn't have been too surprising, given that the Pit was a truly ancient monster.

As for the most purely *challenging* labyrinths… you had the aptly-named Hell, located on the Divine Continent, and Devil's Cave, which sat in the middle of the Ringus Sea. Both of these were brutally difficult even to reach, meaning it was all but impossible to resupply once you arrived. Given their great depth, and the fact that you couldn't really take your time exploring them, they'd earned a reputation as the toughest tests an adventurer could face.

That was basically the extent of my knowledge on this topic at the moment.

"I've read a bit about labyrinths…"

"Ah. *The Three Swordsmen and the Labyrinth*, right? Exploring a legendary dungeon like that's a sure way to get your name into the history books. Ever thought about giving it a shot yourself?"

The Three Swordsmen and the Labyrinth was the tale of three brilliant young fighters who would come to be known as the Sword God, the Water God, and the North God. The book began with their initial meeting and followed them through a series of twists and turns that led them to challenge a huge labyrinth together. There was plenty of conflict, laughter, and male bonding along the way, as well as a few painful farewells; in the end, naturally, they achieved their goal triumphantly.

The labyrinth in that book only went down about a hundred floors, but it was bad enough.

"Isn't that just a story, though?"

"Nope. They say the three great styles we've passed down through the generations were born inside that labyrinth."

"Hmm, really? But those guys became Divine-class swordsmen, and they had all sorts of trouble… I don't think I'd last five minutes in that place."

"Hey, I used to poke around in labyrinths all the time, okay? You'd be fine."

Paul rolled right into the story of a young Oni man who teamed up with a group of human warriors to enter a labyrinth full of Fishmen, and their eventual victory at the cost of several comrades. Before I had time to process that one, he moved on to the tale of an incompetent magician who accidentally fell into a labyrinth, joined a party that happened to have lost its own magician, and discovered his latent talents in the heat of battle.

It kind of felt like Paul had been rehearsing this conversation in advance.

Come to think of it… he wanted me to be a swordsman, didn't he? I guess the plan was to barrage me with stories of adventure and fill my head with dreams of labyrinths and dramatic battles. I wouldn't say I was uninterested, especially when it came to the labyrinths themselves. But on the whole, it sounded way too dangerous.

The people in that book tended to meet their ends pretty damn abruptly, for one thing. The three swordsmen weren't the only characters, of course, but they were the only ones who survived their expedition. One of their allies got charred to a crisp in the middle of a conversation by a fireball

that came flying out of nowhere. Another one fell through a hole in the floor and went splat. Oh, and then there was that guy who got chopped in half the moment he poked his head out of cover. Even warriors strong enough to take down fearsome monsters easily were slaughtered by traps the instant they got a little careless.

Being the protagonists and all, our three heroes made their way past these obstacles unscathed, but I doubted a clumsy guy like me could manage that. I was the oblivious type, after all.

"What d'you think? Adventuring might be pretty fun, too, right?"

"Come on, you can't be serious."

Why would I deliberately put myself in highly risky situations just to get a thrill? A relaxed life full of women— just like Paul's—seemed way more appealing.

"I think I'm more inclined to spend my life chasing skirts."

"Oho. I guess you really are my son!"

"Ideally, I'd like to build myself a little harem, just like my dear old dad."

"No kidding? Think you'd better stick to chasing one skirt at a time for now, though."

Paul pointed behind me with a grin. I turned around to find myself face to face with a very sulky-looking Sylphie.

Perfect timing, moron.

***

I'd been spending a lot of time in my room with Sylphie recently, walking her through the basics of math and science. It seemed like the quickest way to help her understand how silent spellcasting really worked in detail.

Unfortunately, I'd left school after junior high in my previous life. While I'd technically gotten into some high school for morons, I'd dropped out almost immediately.

As a result, there was a real limit to how much I could teach her. Book learning wasn't everything, sure…but I was starting to get angry at myself for not having taken my studies a bit more seriously.

By now, Sylphie had mastered the basics of reading and writing, and could handle multiplying two-digit numbers. The times table had been something of a struggle, but the girl clearly wasn't dumb. She'd probably pick up division soon enough as well. I was also teaching her some fundamental science, in parallel with magic.

"Why does water turn into, uh…vapor when you heat it up?"

"Well, water naturally dissolves into air, but it takes some heat for that to happen. So, the hotter it gets, the more easily it dissolves."

Today, we were covering the cycle of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation.

"…?"

From the look on Sylphie's face, it was clear she didn't really understand what I was saying. Still, she'd proven herself a quick learner in general. Probably because she always paid attention and tried her best.

"Uhm… Basically, anything melts if you get it hot enough, okay? And if it gets colder again, it turns back into a solid." I wasn't a teacher or anything, so this was the best I could manage.

Sylphie was cleverer than me, anyway. She'd probably try a few things out herself until it all made sense to her. Thanks to magic, you didn't really need tools to experiment with stuff like this.

"Anything can melt? Even stuff like rocks?"

"Yep. You'd need some really intense heat, though."

"Could you melt one, Rudy?"

"Of course." Not that I'd ever tried.

Still, when I really focused, I could now roughly distinguish between the different elements in the air around me. I could probably just pump oxygen and hydrogen into a rock until it melted.

Incidentally, there was also a spell called Magma Gusher that let you create a spontaneous burst of lava. I felt like that one had to be some

combination of earth and fire magic, but it was classed as an Advanced-level fire spell.

They liked to divide things neatly into their different disciplines here, but it was all interrelated. And pumping more raw magical power into your spells wasn't the only way to make them stronger; by manipulating combustible gases, for example, you could produce intense heat more efficiently.

I'd figured all that out by now. But not much else. My skill as a magician hadn't really improved since Roxy left. I'd just been finding ways to combine my current spells, use them more effectively, and increase their power with some minor scientific tweaks.

At a glance, it probably looked like I was growing stronger…but it felt more like I'd hit a dead end. Given my current level of knowledge, I might never manage to do anything more challenging than what I could pull off now.

Back in my former life, it was easy enough to find information on the internet when I needed it, but there

wasn't anything so convenient in this world. Maybe I really did need someone to teach me…

"Hmm. School, huh…?"

Roxy had mentioned that schools for magicians tended to have very strict rules and standards, but maybe I could find some way to get into one.

"Are you going to a school, Rudy?"

Apparently, I'd been thinking out loud. Sylphie turned to look at me, an anxious expression on her face.

The movement left her emerald green hair swaying slightly. She'd been growing it out a little lately…probably because I'd kept dropping casual suggestions, once a month or so. At the moment, it only qualified as a short bob, but it was kind of nice to see her messy little curls react to every movement of her head.

We'd be in ponytail territory in no time.

"No, I'm not planning on it. Father says I'd be bullied so mercilessly that I wouldn't learn a thing."

"But you've been acting kind of strange again…"

Wait, seriously?

That was news to me. Had I screwed up again? I'd been trying so hard to keep up the "totally oblivious" act around her, too…

"I've been strange ever since I was a baby, according to my parents."

I was trying to probe for details with a little joke, but Sylphie frowned and shook her head.

"That's not what I meant. You seem kind of sad lately." '

Oh. Phew.

I was worried she'd gotten a glimpse of my true nature somehow, but apparently, she was just concerned about me.

"Well, I haven't made that much progress lately, you know? I'm not getting any better with magic or the sword."

"But you're already amazing, Rudy…"

"For my age, maybe."

True, there probably weren't that many children in this world on my level. But that said, I hadn't yet accomplished much of anything. My "skill" with magic came partially from my memories of my previous life, and partially from my initial breakthrough with the silent spellcasting. Those two factors had given me a leg up over most people. But now that I'd hit this wall, I couldn't find a way past it. The fact that I could remember thirty-four mostly wasted years wasn't that much help anymore.

It was easy to curse myself for not having studied when I had the chance, but what was done was done. And facts from my former world wouldn't necessarily apply to this one, anyway. This place had its own set of rules I needed to discover. I couldn't just lean on my old memories forever.

Magic was the fundamental law here. And to understand it, I needed to understand this world.

"Still, I feel like it's about time I took my next step forward, you know?"

Sylphie was improving steadily at magic, and getting smarter by the day. Watching her progress was starting to make me feel a little pathetic. I

was just treading water by comparison.

For the moment, I could still think of myself as the oblivious protagonist of this story. But unless I got my arrogant butt in gear, this girl was going to leave me in the dust someday.

Her frown only deepening, Sylphie pressed me further. “Are you gonna go somewhere?”

“Well, maybe,” I answered. “Father did say I should give exploring labyrinths a shot, and there isn’t that much I can do in this village… I’ll probably end up going to some school or trying the adventurer thing, I guess.”

I’d spoken casually, without giving it too much thought. But for some reason…

“N-no!” Sylphie cried out and threw her arms around me.

Oho. What’s this, hmm? Time for a confession scene?!

But even as the thought was running through my mind, I realized she was trembling.

“Uh… Miss Sylphiette?”

“No… No… No!”

The girl was squeezing me so hard it was difficult to breathe. Not sure how to respond, I fell silent for a moment.

“Don’t… Don’t go, Rudy! Hic… Waaaah!”

Apparently interpreting this negatively, Sylphie burst into tears. Little shoulders shuddering, she proceeded to bury her face in my chest.

Huh? Seriously? Uh, what’s going on here?

For the moment, the girl clearly needed comforting, so I stroked her head and rubbed her back. I wrapped my arms around Sylphie. When I buried my face in her hair, I discovered that it smelled extremely nice.

Oh man. Pure bliss.

Can I just…keep her? Please?

“Hic… Please, Rudy… Don’t… Don’t go away…”

Whoops. Snap out of it, stupid.

"O-okay…"

It made perfect sense, really.

For a while now, Sylphie had been coming over to our house first thing in the morning almost every day. She would happily watch me practice my swordplay, after which we moved on to magic and her studies.

If I suddenly left, Sylphie's whole daily routine would disappear, and she'd go right back to being a loner. She could fend off bullies with her magic now, but it wasn't like she'd made any other friends.

The more I thought about it, the more affection I felt for her. I was the only one Sylphie cared about this deeply. She was mine, and mine alone.

"I get the message, okay? I won't go anywhere."

How could I even think of tossing a sweet little girl like this aside and wandering off somewhere? To do what? Improve my magic? To hell with that. I could already cast Advanced- and Saint-tier spells. That was good enough to make a living as a tutor, the way Roxy did. So why couldn't I just stay here with Sylphie until we were old enough to get by on our own?

Sounded pretty good to me. We'd grow up together…and she'd grow up into my perfect woman.

Hikaru Genji style, baby!

Gweheheh.

…Crap! No. No. Bad thoughts. Bad thoughts.

What happened to the whole 'oblivious' thing, buddy? You're getting way too far ahead of yourself.

Hm. Well, that said… there's nothing in the rulebook that says an oblivious protagonist can't brainwash their childhood friend, right?

Gah! What am I thinking?! But… ugggh.

The girl was only six years old. She was clearly very fond of me, but she wasn't capable of feeling romantic love yet.

So, uh… yeah. Let's put all that on hold.

For how long, though? Now that was the question. Did I need to wait

until she turned ten? Fifteen? Even older…?

What if she ended up hating me for wasting her time?

Her affection meter was at max for now, but there was no guarantee it would stay that way forever. Could I live with myself if it dropped to zero?

No. Hell no!!! I'm a man who knows my limits, damn it!

Seriously, she's so soft and warm and fluffy! And she smells so freakin' good! She's baring her soul to me right now, and I'm supposed to just sit here slack-jawed?! That's so messed up! We both know how we feel, so we should just take this to the next level!

Why force myself to waste precious time? Why not just admit I made the wrong call?!

That does it. I've decided! I'll make her into my perfect girl!

I'm…I'm oblivious no more, Sylphieeee!

"Hey, Rudy…letter for you."

At this point, Paul barged into the room, pulling me out of my own little world—and not a moment too soon. Startled, I pulled away from Sylphie.

My dear father probably deserved some gratitude for that one. I'd been about two minutes away from turning into an extremely pathetic kind of villain.

Still, a man's endurance had its limits. I'd managed to weather this storm, but there was no telling what might happen next time.

***

The letter I received that day was from Roxy, as it happened.

Dear Rudeus, How have you been?

It's hard to believe, but I suppose two years have flown by since we parted.

Things have finally settled down a bit on my end, so I thought I'd take the chance to write.

At the moment, I'm staying in the royal capital of the Kingdom of Shirone. In the course of exploring various labyrinths, it seems I've made something of a name for myself, so I ended up getting hired to tutor a certain prince.

Teaching him brings back memories of the time I spent in the Greyrat household. For one thing, the prince is actually quite a bit like the young man I tutored there. While not quite as talented as you, he's a quick-witted boy and a budding young magician in his own right. Regrettably, he's also prone to stealing my underwear and peeping on me when I'm changing, just like someone else I could name. His personality's a bit on the pompous side, and he's considerably more energetic, but on the whole your patterns of behavior are quite similar.

Perhaps ambitious men are all sex-crazed animals at heart? I'm a bit worried he'll assault me before I'm finished teaching him. Can't say I understand what you people find so appealing about my scrawny little body, honestly.

Hmm. Maybe I shouldn't be writing this. If anyone were to read it, they might toss me in the dungeon for besmirching the honor of the royal family.

I'll just have to cross that bridge when I come to it. It's not like I mean any of this in a bad way, really.

In any case, it seems the royal court is planning to appoint me as a "court magician" for the duration of my stay. There's still a great deal of magical research I'm itching to pursue, so that should work out quite nicely.

Oh, that reminds me—I've finally managed to get the hang of casting King-tier water spells. The royal library here happened to have some helpful books on the subject. Back when I first mastered Saint-tier magic, I thought that was the best I could ever do, but it seems a bit of good old-fashioned effort goes a long way.

I wouldn't be surprised if you're already casting Imperial-tier water spells by now, Rudeus. Or maybe you broadened your horizons and reached the Saint-tier in a different discipline? I know how voracious your thirst for knowledge is, so I could certainly see you dabbling in Healing or Summoning

as well.

Then again, maybe you chose to focus on your swordplay instead. I'd be a bit disappointed, to be honest, but I'm positive you'd make your mark on the world either way. Personally, I'm aiming to become a Water Saint-tier magician.

Like I mentioned before…if you ever find yourself hitting a dead end in your magical studies, go get yourself admitted to the Ranoa University of Magic. Without a letter of recommendation, you'll need to pass an entrance exam. But I don't think that should pose you any difficulty at all.

Well then, until we meet again—
Roxy

P.S. It's quite possible I will have left the royal court by the time your reply reaches it, so don't feel obliged to respond.

Well, damn. Talk about a wake-up call.

It took a moment for me to find the Kingdom of Shirone on the map. It was a small country in the southeastern part of the Central Continent. Not so far away from here as the crow flies, but the mountain range in between was infested with red dragons, making it totally impassable. You'd have to take the long way around and approach it from the south.

For all intents and purposes, Shirone was a far-off land. And as for Ranoa, home to that university of magic… you'd need to take a big loop around to the northwest to get there.

"Hmm…"

At least now I knew why Roxy had never told me anything about magic above the King-tier. She didn't know any better spells herself at the time.

I decided to write a brief, vague reply to the letter. No need to explain the sad truth about my current situation. The girl seemed to have a mental image of me as some sort of genius, and I didn't want to disappoint her.

Anyway…the Ranoa University of Magic, huh?

Roxy always made it sound like an amazing place. But it wasn't exactly close to home, and I couldn't just abandon Sylphie here.

What to do?

For the moment, I finished my letter, paused, and then added a brief note.

P.S. Sorry about stealing your panties.

***

The next day, I waited until my family was gathered at the dinner table, and then made my move.

"Father, can I make a selfish request?"

"Hell no."

…only to be shot down instantly.

Fortunately, Paul's response earned him a good hard smack to the head from Zenith, who was seated at his side. And a follow-up attack from Lilia, who was seated on his other side.

Ever since that whole mess with the unexpected pregnancy, Lilia had been joining us at the dinner table instead of waiting on us like a maid. It seemed like she was officially part of the family now.

Was polygamy…even a thing in this country? Ah, well. Not my problem!

"You just tell your father what you want, Rudy. He'll make it happen," said Zenith, with a sidelong glare at her husband—who was currently cradling his head in his hands.

"The young master's never asked for much. This is a golden opportunity to demonstrate some paternal dignity, Master Paul," Lilia added supportively.

After resettling himself in his seat, Paul folded his arms and stuck out his chin imperiously. "Look, the kid wants something so crazy that he asked

permission just to bring it up. Whatever it is, it's probably impossible."

This comment earned him another two smacks that knocked him right back down to the table. Just our usual family slapstick routine.

All right, let's get straight to the point.

"The thing is, I've recently hit a dead end in my magical studies. And for that reason, I was hoping to attend the Ranoa University of Magic…"

"Oh?"

"But when I mentioned this to Sylphie, she broke down in tears and begged me not to leave her."

"Hah, what a little lady-killer! Wonder who you got that from?"

Another two smacks followed that one, naturally.

"The ideal solution would be for the two of us to go together, but Sylphie's family isn't as well-off as ours. I wanted to ask if you'd consider paying for both of us to attend."

"You don't say?"

Leaning his elbows on the table, Paul shot me a sharp look that brought to mind a certain spectacled commander. His eyes were deadly serious—the same way they got when he picked up a sword.

"Well, the answer's no."

Once again, he'd shot me down. But this time it wasn't just a joke, and Zenith and Lilia stayed silent.

"I've got three reasons. First, you're still in the middle of your training with the sword. If you drop it now, you'll end up a permanent amateur with no hope of improving. As your teacher, I can't allow that. Second, the money is an issue. We could probably manage your tuition, but not Sylphie's, too. Magic schools aren't cheap, and it's not like we have a magical money tree ourselves. Third, you're only seven years old. You're a clever kid, but there's still plenty you don't know, and you're seriously lacking in real-world experience. It would just be irresponsible for me to cut you loose right now."

Paul's refusal didn't surprise me in the least. I wasn't about to give up, though. Unlike before, he was grounding his denial in three rational, well-defined objections. That meant that if I addressed those points, I could gain

his permission.

There was no need to rush. I never expected any of this to happen tomorrow, anyway.

"I understand, Father. I'll continue training with you in the sword, of course… but can I ask how old you think I need to be before this could happen?"

"Let's see… Fifteen? Nah, let's say twelve. Stick around that long, at least."

Twelve? Hmm. Fifteen was the age kids came of age in this country, as I recalled.

"Can I ask why you chose twelve, specifically?"

"That's the age I was when I left home myself."

"Ah. All right."

This didn't seem like something Paul would be willing to compromise on. No point arguing about it and getting his hackles up.

"Well then, one last thing."

"Sure."

"Can you help me find a job? I can read, write, and do arithmetic, so I might make a decent tutor. I wouldn't mind working as a magician, either. I'd take whatever pays best."

"You want a job? Why?" Paul asked, his eyes narrowing.

"I want to earn Sylphie's tuition for her."

"I don't think it's in her best interest for you to do that."

"Maybe not. I think it's in *my* best interest, though."

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The room fell completely silent for a long moment. I had to fight the urge to squirm awkwardly in my seat.

"I see. So, that's how it is, huh?"

In the end, Paul nodded to himself, apparently convinced of… something.

"All right, fine. In that case, I'll look into a few things for you."

While Zenith and Lilia's faces now expressed open concern, the look in Paul's eyes told me that I could take him at his word.

"Thank you very much," I said, lowering my head in gratitude as my family resumed their meal.

Paul

Well, I can't say I was expecting that.

I knew my boy was growing up quickly, but most kids don't start talking like that until they're fourteen or fifteen at the earliest. Even I didn't hit this stage until I turned eleven, when I reached Advanced level in the Sword God Style. And some people never get to it at all.

What was that phrase again? *"Don't rush through your life too fast, or it'll end before you know it."*

A certain warrior had told me that a long time ago. I'd just rolled my eyes back then. The way I saw it, everyone else was taking things too damn slowly. Any given human has a limited window of time in which they can actually accomplish things, but nobody seemed to feel any sense of urgency at all.

I wanted to do everything I possibly could while I had the chance. And if someone wanted to criticize me after the fact, well, I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

Of course, thanks to "doing" everything I could, I'd eventually found myself with a pregnant wife on my hands. Ended up quitting the adventuring

business and leaning on my high-status relatives' connections to get myself a steady job as a knight.

Forget that part for now, though. Point is, Rudeus was taking things at a much quicker pace than I ever did. The kid was sprinting forward so fast that it made me a little nervous just to watch him go.

I'm sure the adults around me had similar thoughts when I was young. There was one major difference, though: Rudeus was actually planning things in advance instead of randomly flailing about the way I used to. I have to assume he got that side of his personality from Zenith.

Still, I think I need to keep him in one place a little longer.

With that thought in mind, I began to write a letter.

Just like Laws had been telling me the other day, Sylphie had clearly gotten quite attached to Rudeus.

From her perspective, he was both the knight in shining armor who'd saved her from the misery of her early childhood and the all-knowing big brother who could answer all her questions.

She obviously admired him. Recently, she seemed to be developing a crush on him as well.

Laws, for his part, told me he was hoping the two of them might end up getting hitched someday. At the time, I was pretty pleased at the prospect of adding such a cute daughter to the family…but after hearing what Rudeus had said today, I had to reconsider.

Right now, the girl was basically putty in his hands. If the two of them continued to grow up together like this, Sylphie was going to be permanently dependent on Rudeus. Even as an adult.

I'd seen a few cases like that back when I was still "nobility." I'd seen human beings who were little more than puppets, totally controlled by their parents. That life's not so bad while the guy who pulls your strings is still around, I guess. As long as Rudeus kept loving Sylphie, she'd probably be just fine.

But unfortunately, the kid had a bit of his dad in him as well. He was a born womanizer, in other words. There was a chance he might go running off after every other girl who caught his eye.

A chance? Nah. The boy was my son. He was definitely going to mess around. And when the dust settled, he might not end up choosing Sylphie.

She'd never recover from that blow. Never. My son might very well end up entirely ruining that sweet little kid's life. I couldn't allow that to happen. It sure as hell wouldn't be in his best interests, either.

And so, I wrote my letter. Hopefully I'd get the response I was looking for.

That said…how was I going to convince that smooth-talking kid to go along with this?

Hmm. Maybe this called for a brute-force approach.

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Chapter 11:
Parted

One morning, maybe a month after I told Paul that I wanted to start working, a letter addressed to him arrived at our home.

It was probably the reply that I'd been waiting for. I tried my best to brace myself for the news without getting too impatient.

Would he tell me after training? At lunch? Maybe dinner?

For the moment, I decided to focus on our sword practice.

***

As it happened, though, he chose to bring it up before we'd even finished training.

"Hey, Rudy."

"Yes, Father? What is it?"

Trying to keep my face composed, I waited eagerly for Paul's next words. This was going to be my first job ever… in either life. I had to nail this.

But instead of giving me the good news I was expecting, Paul took things in a strange direction.

"Tell me something. What would you do if I said you had to stop seeing Sylphie for a while?"

"What? Uh, I'd object, obviously…"

"Right, right. Figures."

"What's this about?"

"Ah, forget it. No point talking this over. You'd just twist it all around on me, I'm sure."

The instant these words left Paul's mouth, his expression changed dramatically. All of a sudden, there was murder in his eyes. Even an amateur like me could sense what was coming next.

"Wha—?!"

"…!"

In one smooth, intimidating motion, my father leapt forward.

Death was rushing straight at me, cold and silent.

Acting on pure instinct, I responded with all the power at my disposal —using fire and wind magic simultaneously to create a blast between us. I jumped backwards just as the wave of hot wind struck me, letting the impact carry me farther.

As it happened, I'd played out this scenario in my mind more than once. In a fight against Paul, I had no chance unless I put some distance between us at the start. The blast would hurt me as much as him, but as long as I took the damage without flinching, it would buy me a bit of space.

Only a bit, of course.

My totally unscathed father was still running forward, his body low to the ground.

Didn't do a damn thing to him!

I hadn't expected anything else, but it was still terrifying. I needed to make my next move, and fast.

Just backing up wouldn't work. The guy running forward would always be faster. Acting on a reflexive judgment call, I set off a shockwave right next to myself. The blow hit me hard enough to send me flying to the side.

In that same instant, I heard something slice through the air next to my ear, and my blood ran cold. Paul's sword had slashed through the space where my head had been a split second earlier.

Well. That's good, I guess…

I'd dodged the first attack. That was a very big deal. He was still close, but I'd put a little distance between us.

I started seeing some possibility I might win this.

As Paul turned toward me to press the attack, I cast a spell that turned the ground in front of him into a sinkhole. His leading foot stepped right into the trap.

He instantly shifted his body's entire weight onto his other leg and freed himself—barely even missing a beat.

Damn! Do I need to catch both his legs at once?!

This time, I transformed the ground around me into a thick, watery bog. Before I could sink into it, I fired a small jet of water at the ground in front of me, sending myself gliding backward across the surface.

By the time I realized that I wasn't moving fast enough, it was too late. Paul reached the edge of my little swamp and took one great bound forward. The force of his stride actually left a small crater in the ground.

The man was going to reach me in a single leap.

"Aaaaaah!"

I swung my sword in a blind panic, trying to intercept him. It was an ugly, careless attack, nothing like the strikes I'd learned.

The grip of my sword wobbled unpleasantly in my hands as my blow was gently turned aside. I could tell Paul had used a Water God Style defense…for all the good it did me.

Once a Water God swordsman deflects your blow, they always follow up with a counterstrike. I knew what was coming, but I couldn't do a thing about it.

Paul's blade arced toward me for a moment that lasted an eternity.

Well, I'm glad we're using wooden swords, at least…

A short, sharp blow to my neck knocked me instantly unconscious.

***

When I woke up, I found myself inside a box of some sort. Given all the swaying and clattering going on, it was presumably some kind of vehicle.

I tried to sit up, only to discover that I couldn't move at all. Looking

down, I realized I was tightly bound in… quite a lot of rope.

What the hell is going on here?

I managed to turn my neck enough to look around, and saw there was a woman in there with me. She had dark brown skin, a muscular body covered in scars, and skimpy leather clothes that didn't leave much to the imagination. The strong features of her face, combined with the eyepatch she was wearing, gave her a definite tough-guy vibe.

Pretty much the picture of a fearless female warrior from some fantasy show… especially given those big, furry ears and tiger-like tail.

Apparently sensing my eyes on her, the woman glanced down at me.

"Nice to meet you," I said. "My name's Rudeus Greyrat. Pardon my manners—I can't seem to get up at the moment."

A preemptive introduction felt like the right move. The most basic rule of conversation was to start talking first. Once you seized the initiative, you could control where things went from there.

"For Paul's son, you're oddly polite."

"I'm my mother's son as well, as it happens."

"Ah, right. Guess you've got some Zenith in you, too."

Apparently, she knew both of my parents. That was something of a relief.

"The name's Ghislaine. We'll be getting very well acquainted starting tomorrow, kid."

Starting tomorrow? What?

"Uhm, well, okay. Nice to meet you, Ghislaine."

"Yeah. Same here."

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At this point, I went ahead and burned away the ropes around me with a bit of fire magic.

My body was sore as hell. That wasn't too surprising, since I hadn't been sleeping in the most comfortable of places. I stretched out my arms and legs and reveled in the blissful sense of release. Sure, I'd spent most of my previous life sitting in a cramped little room moving nothing but my fingers, but that didn't mean I wanted to spend so much time lying bound and helpless at the feet of some sadistic-looking older lady. Might have gotten a little uncomfortable after a while.

There were benches to the front and rear of our little "box," so I sat down across from Ghislaine. Windows to the left and right offered a view of the world outside; nothing I saw outside looked remotely familiar.

Okay, so this was definitely a vehicle.

It was swaying so vigorously that I was a little worried I might get sick, and I could hear a sort of clopping coming from the direction we were moving in. Seemed reasonable to assume it was a horse-drawn carriage.

Right. So. I was taking a carriage ride with some macho lady, for reasons totally unclear to me.

Gah! H-have I been kidnapped by some wanton woman weightlifter?! Did she steal the cutest boy in all the land to be her sex slave?

Please, have mercy! I…I sorta dig girls with muscles, yes… but I've already pledged my heart to Sylphie!

Well… if you must do it… be gentle with me, pwease…

Wait. Wait, wait. Bad thoughts.

C-c-calm down, dumbass. At times like these, a man's gotta stay cool! Count off prime numbers in your head until you relax! Remember what that one priest guy said. "The primes are solitary numbers, divisible only by one and themselves… they give me strength!"

Three. Five. Uhm…eleven. Thirteen…? Uh, er… I can't remember, damn it!

Okay, screw the prime numbers. Just calm down, dude. Think through this calmly. You need to figure out what's going on here. Deep breaths.

Deeeeeep breaths.

"Hooo… haaaa…"

Attaboy. Now then, let's piece this together as best we can.

First of all, Paul had attacked me for no apparent reason and knocked me senseless. And when I'd woken up, I'd found myself inside a carriage, bound hand and foot. Presumably, he'd KO'd me for some specific reason and then tossed me in here.

The only other person in said carriage was a macho lady who said we'd be getting "acquainted" starting tomorrow. Come to think of it…Paul also said something strange right before he attacked me.

Something like, "Stop seeing Sylphie."

Or maybe, "Sylphie's too good for the likes of you."

Or maybe, 'Sylphie's mine now, kiddo!'

Th-that scumbag pedo! Does his lust know no bounds?!

Wait, I think I just made up those last two. Hmm.

It was hard to think straight where Sylphie was concerned. I'd gotten completely derailed in no time at all. *Damn it. This is all Paul's fault… Ah, well, guess I'll just have to ask.*

"Uhm, Miss?"

"You can call me Ghislaine."

"Oh, okay. In that case, you can call me Ruru."

"Sure thing, Ruru."

Right. So, the woman clearly didn't know a joke when she heard one.

"Miss Ghislaine, did my father tell you what's going on here?"

"Just Ghislaine, kid. No *miss* required."

As she spoke, Ghislaine reached into her jacket to retrieve a letter and handed it over to me. The front of it was completely blank.

"That's for you, from Paul. Read it out loud, will you? I'm not so good with writing."

"Okay."

Opening up the sloppily folded piece of paper, I began to read. *"To my dear son Rudeus. If you're reading this letter, it means that I'm no longer in this world."*

"What, what?!" Ghislaine shouted, jumping to her feet.

Good thing this carriage had a high ceiling.

"Please sit down, Ghislaine. There's more."

"Hm. Right…"

Just like that, she sat right back down.

"Sorry, just kidding! I always wanted to try that one out on somebody.

"So, anyway. I knocked you down into the dirt, tied you up, and tossed you into a carriage like a bandit kidnapping a princess. I expect you're wondering what the hell is going on, hey? Ideally, that ball of muscle in there with you would just explain everything…but sadly, her brain mutated into an extra bicep some time ago, so I don't think that's going to work."

"What was that?!" Ghislaine shouted, jumping to her feet again.

"Please sit down, Ghislaine. The next part's nothing but compliments."

"Hm. Right."

Right back down she went. Okay then, moving on.

"That woman's a Sword King. When it comes to the blade, you won't find a better teacher this side of the Sword Sanctum. Trust your old man on this one: She's really damn good. I never once got the upper hand on her… except in bed."

Dad. Please. Could you not have just left that last part out?

Ghislaine didn't exactly look displeased, though. The old man was certainly popular with the ladies.

Anyway…I was evidently travelling with one hell of a fighter.

"Now then, let's move on to your job. You're going to be tutoring a young lady in Roa, the biggest city in the Fittoa Region. Teach her reading, writing, math, and some basic magic, all right? The girl's a spoiled, violent brat who was asked to leave her school, and she's already chased off a number of other tutors. But I've got faith in you, kiddo! I'm sure you'll

manage somehow."

Wow. Very helpful, Paul.

"Uh… y-you don't really look spoiled, Ghislaine…"

"I'm not the young lady in question."

"Right. Of course."

Okay, let's keep moving.

"That lump of muscle with you works for the young lady's family as a bodyguard and swordsmanship instructor. In exchange for training you in the sword, she wants you to teach her reading, writing, and arithmetic as well. I know, it's a ridiculous request coming from a woman with a bicep-brain, but try not to laugh out loud. She's probably serious."

"That son of a…"

Was I seeing things, or was that a vein throbbing on Ghislaine's forehead? The main purpose of this letter was to explain the situation to me, but Paul's secondary goal was clearly to piss her off. Made me kind of curious about the nature of their relationship.

"She won't be a quick learner, I'm sure, but it's not such a bad deal. You won't have to pay for your lessons, at least."

My lessons, huh? Right. I guess she was my new instructor from now on…

Paul's swordsmanship was mostly instinct-based. Maybe he felt I needed a better teacher at this point. Or maybe he'd just gotten sick of watching me not improve at all.

I think you could have stuck it out a little longer, man…

"How much would it usually cost to learn the sword from you, Ghislaine?"

"Two gold Asuran coins per month."

Say what?! I was pretty sure that Roxy had earned five silver coins a month back when she was tutoring me. This lady charged about four times more.

This was really a pretty solid deal, then. A normal person in Asura

could get by on about two silver coins a month.

"For the next five years, you'll be staying at the young lady's house to teach her. Five whole years, you got that? You don't get to come back home until then. And no writing letters, either. Sylphie's never going to learn how to stand on her own two feet if you keep hanging around the village. And you were growing increasingly reliant on her, as well. That's why I made the call to separate the two of you."

"Wait… what?"

H-hold on a second. What?

Are you serious? I can't see Sylphie for five whole years? I can't even write her letters?!

"What's the matter, Ruru? Did you break up with your girlfriend?" Ghislaine asked, apparently amused by the look of despair on my face.

"No. My childish bully of a father broke us up by force."

I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye. *Damn it, Paul. You'll pay for this…*

"Hang in there, Ruru. It'll be okay."

"Uhm…"

"What?"

"I think I'd rather you just called me Rudeus, actually."

"Hmm. All right, then."

When I really thought about it, though, Paul had a point. At the rate things were going, Sylphie might have turned into a "childhood friend" character from a particularly shitty visual novel. You know…the kind who sticks to the protagonist constantly, revolving around him like a satellite, and never develops a personality of her own.

In the real world, a girl like that would make her own friends and learn about new things at school. But thanks to her hair, Sylphie was always going to have a tough time with that. There was a real chance she would have stayed glued to my side for years and years. I wouldn't really have minded, but the adults involved felt differently.

This made sense. Paul had made the right call this time.

"As for your compensation, you'll be paid two silver Asuran coins a month. That's below the going rate for a live-in tutor, but it's more than enough for a child's allowance. When you have a little spare time, try to head out into the city and get a feel for spending money. A little practice is the best way to make sure you can use your cash effectively when you really need to. Then again, maybe that won't even be an issue for a kid as gifted as you. Just don't go buying any women, though. You got that?"

Seriously, man. You could just leave that part out!

What, was he trying some sort of reverse psychology here? Like, 'Don't hit up any brothels, son! Wink wink, nudge nudge'?

"Additionally, once you complete five years of consistent service and finish providing the young lady with a solid education in all respects, your contract entitles you to a special reward: a payment covering the cost of tuition for two people to the University of Magic."

Hrm. I see.

In other words, once I did my time as a tutor, Paul was going to let me do what I wanted…just as he'd promised.

"Of course, there's no guarantee Sylphie will want to tag along with you five years from now, and you might lose interest in her yourself. But in any case, I'll make sure to explain the situation perfectly to her."

Uh…not sure I trust you on that one, daddy dearest.

"I hope the years you spend in this new environment will teach you many things, allowing you to develop your talents even further. Sincerely, your noble, wise, and brilliant father, Paul."

Brilliant my ass! Your whole plan was just to beat me into submission!

Still, I had to admit his overall line of thinking was pretty solid. This was for the best, for both Sylphie and me. She might go back to being a loner again, but…unless she learned to face her own problems, she was never really going to grow as a person.

"Paul really loves you, doesn't he?" Ghislaine said.

I couldn't help smiling a little at that one.

"He used to be kind of distant, but he started really getting into the

whole fatherhood thing. Anyway, seems like he's pretty fond of you as well, Ghislaine…"

"Hm? Why d'you say that?"

I proceeded to read the letter's final line out loud.

"P.S. Feel free to make a move on the young lady as long as it's consensual, but that ball of muscle's already mine, so hands off."

"Hmm," Ghislaine said. "Send that letter on to Zenith for me, will you?"

"Sounds like a plan."

Just like that, I found myself travelling to the Citadel of Roa, the largest settlement in the Fittoa Region.

I had some mixed feelings about that, of course, but it really was for the best. I couldn't just stay with Sylphie, so this was something that needed to happen.

I definitely wasn't bitter about it at all. Nope.

Man. I wish I could go see her once a year or so, at least…

Well… maybe I'd manage to convince myself of that at some point. I just wasn't quite there yet.

Paul

"**D**-damn, that was close…"

My son lay unconscious on the ground before my filthy, mud-caked shoes.

Since this would be my last day teaching him the sword, I'd decided to put the fear of God in him before I knocked

him out, but the kid actually snapped off a bunch of spells the instant I made my move. Wasn't just a bunch of panicked attacks, either. He was mainly trying to slow me down. And every single time he cast something, it was a different spell.

"That's my son for you, all right. Kid's got a knack for battle…"

Sure, the fight had only lasted a few seconds. But it was a complete surprise attack, and I still needed three steps to take him down. That last one had been especially dangerous. If I'd hesitated even slightly, he would have snared both my legs and taken me out in no time.

Three steps was just too many when you're fighting a magician. If he'd been in a group, one of his allies would have stepped in to protect him by the time I'd taken my second stride. And if there'd been just a bit more distance between us, I might have needed four steps.

For all intents and purposes, the kid got the best of me. You could probably toss him into a party of adventurers right now. He'd more than pull his own weight in a labyrinth.

"Guess you'd expect no less from the prodigy who gave a Water Saint-tier magician an inferiority complex…"

The boy was downright terrifying. But for some reason, that made me happy. Up until now, I'd been jealous of anyone more talented than me…but where my son was concerned, all I felt was pride.

"Okay, this isn't the time to be talking to myself. Let's get this done before Laws makes it over here…"

I quickly proceeded to tie up my son. The carriage had arrived by the time I finished, so I picked him up and prepared to toss him into it.

Of course, Laws picked that moment to show up with Sylphie in tow.

"Rudy?!"

Seeing her playmate bound hand and foot, the girl immediately fired off an Intermediate-tier offensive spell at me without so much as an incantation. I warded it off easily enough, but on top of the silent spellcasting, the attack's power and speed were both impressive. She could easily have killed a normal person.

Damn it, Rudeus. Don't go teaching her that crap…

After handing Ghislaine my letter, I unceremoniously dumped Rudeus in the carriage and let the coachman know he was good to go. Glancing over, I saw Laws crouched next to Sylphie, speaking to her firmly but quietly.

Yeah, that's the way. It's the parent's job to teach their kid what's what.

Laws had allowed Rudeus to take over many of his duties, but now he'd get the chance to reclaim his rightful role. Exhaling quietly, I watched the little family conference from a distance; after a moment, the wind carried Sylphie's voice over to me.

"No… I'll get strong enough to help Rudy!"

Hmm. That girl really adores you, son of mine.

At this point, my two wives emerged from the house. I'd told them to stay inside if they wanted to watch, mostly for their own safety. But I suppose they wanted to see the boy off, at least.

"Oh, my sweet little Rudy's leaving me!"

"Be brave, Madam. This is a trial we must endure!"

"I know, Lilia. I know! Oh, Rudeus, Rudeus! My little son is riding off! He's left his poor mother all alone. Woe is me!"

"You're not alone, Madam. He's not your only child!"

"You're right, of course. He has two little sisters now."

"Two?! Oh, Madam!"

"Of course, Lilia. I'll love your child as much as mine!

As much as I love you!"

"Oh, Madam! I feel just the same!"

For some reason, Zenith and Lilia acted out a weirdly theatrical scene as the carriage set off down the road. I suppose they weren't really too worried about Rudeus.

The kid had a solid head on his shoulders, after all.

In any case…those two sure do get along these days. Wish they'd be that friendly with Daddy, too. Or at least stop ganging up on me.

"Still… I guess Rudeus won't be around to watch the little ones grow up, huh?"

I knew he'd been planning to become the "best big brother ever," but

things weren't going to work out that way.

Tough luck, kid. Daddy's going to get all his little daughters' love! Eheheheh.

Hm. Wait a second, though.

Rudeus was about to start special, accelerated training under a Sword King. Five years from now, he would be twelve. Much bigger and stronger than he was now. If we had another anything-goes scrap when he came back, was I even going to stand a chance?

Oh, man. My paternal dignity was on the line.

"Zenith, dear? Lilia? Now that Rudy's left us, I think I'll have to start training a bit as well."

Zenith glanced at me with a disinterested expression. Lilia leaned over to stage-whisper in her ear. "Did it really take a near loss to make him realize that the young master might soon surpass him?"

"Honestly, he's always like this. Never puts a bit of effort in until someone nearly embarrasses him."

Apparently, I was already somewhat lacking in the paternal dignity department.

Ah well. What's dignity good for, anyway? My old man was a walking lump of pride and nobility, and I was never exactly fond of him. I wanted to be a friendly, lovable kind of father, not a dignified one.

So for now, I'd just keep pretending to be a good-for-nothing guy with a weakness for the ladies. Until my three kids were all grown up, at least…

At this point, I glanced at Zenith out of the corner of my eye.

Damn, that's a nice body. You'd never know she's already had two kids… Maybe we could try for four or five? That's one way to earn myself an extension, I guess. Nheheh.

Well, there was time enough to think about that later.

Thoughts ran through my mind as Rudeus's carriage rumbled off down the road.

Rudeus… Believe me, this isn't how I wanted to do this, either. I don't think you would have agreed to my plan, and I'm not sure I could have

convinced you in an argument.

Still… as your father, I couldn't just do nothing. I'm basically passing you off to someone else for now, but I think that's how it has to be.

I know I didn't give you any choice, but I'm sure a clever kid like you will understand. The experiences you're going to have out there wouldn't have been possible in this village. Even if you don't understand my reasons, dealing with the challenges in front of you will make you stronger in the end.

So resent me all you like. Resent me, and resent yourself for letting me do this.

I grew up under my old man's thumb myself, you know? Ended up just running away, rather than ever facing up to him. I do regret that to some degree. And I wish I'd done some things differently.

I don't want you to feel that way, of course. But you know… running away like that did make me stronger. I'm not sure if I'm stronger than my dad was, but I found women I loved, protected the things I cared about, and grew tough enough to put the screws on my own kid.

You want to fight back? Fine by me. Have at it.

Come back stronger, kid. Strong enough to stand up to your tyrant of a dad.

Extra Chapter:
The Mother of the Greyrat Family

My name is Zenith Greyrat.

I was born in the Holy Country of Millis, a land noted for its long history, great beauty, and rigid moral code. By birth, I was a member of the nobility—the second daughter of a count.

Like most young ladies raised in "good families," I was a sheltered child. I thought the little world I knew was all there was. I was clueless and naïve. But I was also a good child, if I do say so myself. I never disobeyed my parents. My grades in school were excellent. I obeyed the tenets of the Millis Church, and I learned to play the role expected of me in society gatherings. Some people even called me the perfect picture of a Millis lady. My parents were rather proud of me, I'm sure.

Had things continued as they were, I suppose I would have been introduced at some party to a man my parents chose for me. Probably the first son of some marquess, well-mannered but proud, with absolute respect for the dictates of the Millis Church. I would have married this moral paragon, given birth to his children, and seen my name go down in the register of Millis nobility as a perfectly respectable marchioness.

As a woman of the aristocracy, that was the road in front of me.

But of course, I didn't end up following it.

My life changed forever on my fifteenth birthday—the day I came of age. I had a terrible fight with my parents. For the first time in my life, I refused to do what they told me. And I ran away from home.

I'd gotten thoroughly sick of letting them control every moment of my life. My little sister Therese had always been a free spirit, and I think I was a little jealous of her as well. These factors, along with many smaller ones, combined to push me off the path I had been following.

It's not easy for a fallen aristocrat to find a new road through life. But fortunately, I'd learned Healing magic in an academy for noble girls, and had even gotten proficient at Intermediate spells. Millis was a country where

Healing and Protection magic flourished, but it was still unusual to progress beyond the rank of Beginner in either. Reaching the Intermediate tier opened up the possibility of working in the Millis Church's hospitals; it was an achievement that earned me much admiration in our school.

As a result, I was convinced I could make it on my own anywhere I went.

I really was hopelessly naïve.

A dishonest group of people spotted me almost immediately, as I awkwardly tried to navigate the unfamiliar process of taking a room at an inn. Claiming they'd been looking for a healer, they pulled me into their party, taking advantage of my total ignorance. The pay they offered was lower than what Beginner-tier magicians earned, but they insisted it was higher than the going rate.

Being a complete fool, I took their superficial kindness at face value. I actually remember thinking, *I suppose the world does have some decent people in it.*

I'm sure they would have mistreated me further if I had stayed with them. They were probably planning to use me as a human shield in battle or force me to cast magic until I fainted. Maybe even to demand sexual favors.

But they didn't get the chance, thanks to a young swordsman named Paul Greyrat.

After beating down my new "friends," he rather forcefully dragged me into his own travelling party. Until Elinalise—one of his companions—explained, I was convinced I'd been kidnapped by a violent thug.

In any case, that was how I met my future husband.

At first, I hated Paul. He was an Asuran noble by birth, but his language was coarse. He broke his promises left and right, acted impulsively, wasted money, and mocked me constantly. Not to mention that he routinely groped my butt and sometimes made highly inappropriate advances.

Still, I could tell he wasn't exactly a bad person. He was always coming to my rescue, after all. He made fun of my cluelessness, but in the end, he always sighed and stepped in to help.

We were total opposites, but he was dependable, free-spirited, and

handsome. I suppose it isn't that surprising that I grew attracted to him.

Of course, there were always pretty women around him. And I was a follower of the Millis Church, which preached the virtues of monogamy. I might have run away from home, but the teachings of my faith had been drilled into me daily since I was a child, and everyone I knew in school had been a believer. Its commandments were deeply rooted in my mind.

So, one day, I blurted out these words: "You can sleep with me, but only if you never touch any other women again."

Paul immediately agreed with an easy smile.

I knew he was lying to me, of course. But on some level, I didn't mind. Once he broke his promise, I thought I might be able to get over him.

But once again, I'd been naïve, careless, and foolish. I never even considered that I might get pregnant after a single night with him.

I was so hopeless, anxious, and afraid. I certainly didn't expect that Paul would actually do the honorable thing and marry me the way he did.

The child I bore him was a son, as it turned out.

Rudeus Greyrat. My little Rudy.

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At the moment, Rudy was crouched next to his little sisters' cribs with a very serious expression on his face— so much like his father's. Frowning intently, he peered into one crib for a moment, then looked over into the other.

"Aah. Aah!"

Norn began to fuss, and Rudy's expression stiffened even further.

But an instant later…

"Blablabwah!"

He stuck out his tongue at her and made a silly face.

"Ha haa! Baa, baa!"

Nodding in satisfaction as Norn gurgled happily, Rudeus resumed his previous serious expression.

“Aah! Aaah!”

This time, it was Aisha who piped up out of nowhere. Rudeus immediately turned to face her, pressed his palms against his cheeks, and mumbled, “Ajojobloblo.”

Clearly amused, Aisha let out a happy little, “Nhah, ahah!”

Once again, Rudy nodded to himself with a grin of pure pleasure. He’d been keeping up this little routine for quite a while now.

“Heheh…”

At the sight of Rudy’s smile, I couldn’t help but let out a little laugh of my own.

It wasn’t something you saw every day, after all. Rudy always had the most serious expression on; no matter how well things went with his sword practice or his magic, he never looked particularly satisfied. He almost never let me or Paul see him smile. And when he did, it was usually a forced, awkward grin.

But now, he was making silly faces to amuse his little sisters and smiling with genuine pleasure when it worked. Just watching him put me in a pretty good mood myself.

We’d come a long way from the way things used to be.

I sighed quietly to myself, recalling Rudy’s early years. At first, I’d been overjoyed when we discovered his talent for magic. But after a while, I’d started to feel like he was so talented that he secretly looked down on the rest of us. I wondered if he even loved his family at all. He’d never really gotten that attached to me, for one thing.

But I had it all wrong, of course. I realized this in the midst of our greatest family crisis—the day Lilia announced her pregnancy, and Paul confessed that he was responsible.

I felt so terribly betrayed by the both of them. So angry and so sad.

In particular, I was so furious at Paul for breaking his vows to me that I felt about ready to explode. I was on the verge of either screaming, “Get out!”

to Lilia or announcing that I was leaving myself; it took an effort of will to keep myself calm.

Before our marriage, I'd expected Paul to prove himself a liar, and planned to dump him once he did. I'd almost forgotten about that, but apparently my feelings hadn't changed. I was so upset that I was ready to break apart our family for good.

But in the end, Rudy changed my mind. Playing the part of a guileless child, he stepped in to guide things to a neat conclusion. His methods weren't exactly admirable, of course. And even if I believed his little story, it certainly wouldn't have convinced me to forgive my wayward husband.

Still…from Rudy's words and the expression on his face, I could see what he was really feeling, deep down inside.

He was afraid. Terrified his family was going to break apart.

The moment I realized that, I finally understood that he did love us in his own way. And I wanted nothing more than to reassure him. My anger softened. I managed to bring myself to forgive both Paul and Lilia on the spot.

If not for Rudy, things wouldn't have worked out that way.

"Ooh, you're such a cutie pie, Norn. You're gonna be real pretty, just like Mommy, yeah?"

And now, here he was playing with Norn's little hands and smiling happily. My ever-serious little son was soothing his sister with silly baby talk.

He's so…reliable.

I'd been a bit in awe of Rudy's talents for quite some time, but lately I was starting to appreciate his dependability as well. Things had been truly hectic after Aisha and Norn were born. Our two new daughters cried at all hours of the night, puked up half the milk we fed them, and routinely pooped when we were bathing them. Lilia told me all of this was perfectly natural, that it was only to be expected, but in no time, I was utterly exhausted. For days and days, I barely got a wink of sleep.

But then Rudy stepped in and started to handle all sorts of things for us…without even being asked.

He was oddly skillful with the babies. It almost seemed as if he'd cared for one before, although that couldn't possibly be the case. I suppose he must have picked up a few things from watching Lilia.

That's our Rudy for you.

I wasn't particularly happy that my son was better at soothing my own child than I was, but it was still an enormous help. I'd never seen a boy his age so helpful and reliable, or even capable of looking after newborn babies the way he did.

Watching him work sometimes reminded me of my brother, who presumably still lived back in the Holy Country. Like Rudy, he was serious, diligent, and talented; my father always told us to learn from his example. But he was also cold to his family, and ignored his little sisters almost completely. As nobles went, he was a good and honest man, but I didn't think much of him as a brother. Rudy was obviously going to be different. He was going to be a good big brother. The kind who earned his sisters' admiration.

That certainly seemed to be his intention, at least. He'd actually announced "I'm going to try to be the coolest, most perfect big brother ever," to Paul while they looked down at Norn and Aisha. I was already eager to see what the three of them would be like in a few years' time.

"Aah. Agyaaah!"

At this point, I was startled out of my reverie by Norn, who'd begun crying loudly. Rudy's body jerked in surprise, but he quickly turned to her crib to make more silly faces.

"Gyaa! Waaaah!"

This time, Norn didn't stop bawling. Rudy touched her diaper to see if it was wet, then picked her up and checked her back for rashes, but the waterworks just kept flowing.

If I'd been on my own, I probably would have gotten flustered and called for Lilia, only to fall into an outright panic once I remembered she was out shopping at the moment. But Rudy stayed admirably calm. Working by process of elimination, he checked carefully for potential problems. After a while, he clapped his hands and turned to me.

"Mother, I think it's time for her milk."

Come to think of it, it was about that time of day, wasn't it? The hours really did fly when I watched Rudy playing with his sisters.

"Right. Of course."

"Here, have a seat."

I lowered myself into the chair Rudy pulled up for me, opened up my blouse, and took my bawling baby into my arms.

Norn had clearly been quite hungry, just as Rudy thought. She immediately pressed her little mouth to my nipple and began to suckle greedily. The sensation always made me intensely conscious of my own motherhood.

"Hm?"

After a moment, I realized that Rudy was watching.

Whenever I breastfed Norn, he… tended to stare. It wasn't just a curious, innocent gaze, either. There was an element of interest you wouldn't expect from a seven-year-old.

It was cute to see him doing something so much like what Paul did… but if Rudy was already like this at his age, there was probably going to be some trouble down the line. The last thing I wanted was for him to go around breaking women's hearts right and left, the way his father had.

"What's the matter, Rudy? Do you want some too?"

"Huh?!"

Startled by my little joke, Rudy jerked his head away and blushed a brilliant shade of red.

"No, that's not it. I was just impressed by how much she's drinking…"

"Heheh."

It was a bit cute seeing him flustered. I couldn't help laughing a little.

"Sorry, but I need my milk for Norn now. You had plenty when you were a baby, so don't be greedy now, all right?"

"Of course, Mother."

Rudy agreed easily enough, but I saw a slight hint of regret on his face. Definitely an unusual reaction, coming from him. And extremely adorable.

Maybe I'd tease him a little more.

"Hmm. Well, if you're desperate…once you get yourself a wife, why don't you ask her if she'll give you some?"

"Good idea. I'll have to try that out someday."

I was expecting him to get all surly and defensive at this point, but he parried my remark with a calm expression. I suppose he'd figured out I was just messing with him.

No fun. But that's Rudy for you, I suppose.

"Don't go forcing her, mind you."

"Yes, I know."

It always made me feel a bit melancholy to see him acting all grown-up like this.

I turned my attention back to Norn, who'd had her fill. After patting her on the back until she let out a little burp, I gently placed her back in her crib.

As I wiped off my breast with a cloth, I realized Rudy was staring at me again.

Whoever does marry him might have a tough time of it. Sylphie seems like the leading candidate at the moment… and that girl tends to do anything Rudy tells her to. She might not be able to say no, even when she wants to…

All right, then. If worst comes to worst, I'll just have to set him straight.

I was Rudy's mother, after all. Paul might teach him how to seduce women, but I'd teach him how to treat them right.

"Goo…"

Norn looked quite satisfied now she that had something in her stomach. It didn't take long for her to start nodding off in her crib.

"That's the way," I murmured softly, stroking her little head. "Drink lots of milk, get lots of sleep, and grow up nice and healthy."

Unfortunately, Aisha picked this moment to start fussing a little herself.

“Aaah… Waah!”

Tearing his eyes away from my breasts, Rudy peered down into the other crib.

“Whatsamatter, Aisha? Is your back a widdle itchy?”

Just as he’d done for Norn a bit before, he picked

Aisha up, checked her diaper, and looked for rashes and insect bites.

But after a moment, still holding the baby in his arms, he turned to me with an uncharacteristically anxious expression. I did like seeing different emotions on Rudy’s face, but I didn’t want him looking that troubled very often.

“What’s the matter, Rudy?”

“Uhm, Mother… Miss Lilia’s a little late today, isn’t she?”

“Come to think of it, you’re right.”

Normally, she would have returned from her shopping trip by now. Could something have happened?

No, no. A group of merchants from the Citadel of Roa were in town. She’d mentioned she was planning to buy a bit more than usual; it was probably just taking a little longer than expected.

“Well, you see… about Aisha…”

“Yes?”

“I think she’s hungry, too.”

“Oh, I see.”

We tended to feed our babies at the same time, so it made sense they’d both get hungry at the same time as well. Normally, I breastfed Norn while Lilia took care of Aisha, but…

At this point, I finally understood that awkward expression on Rudy’s face.

Slowly, cautiously, he continued, clearly choosing every word with care.

“Mother…there’s no telling when Miss Lilia will get back. I’m sure

Aisha could wait a while, but if she keeps crying, Norn might wake up too, so… uhm…"

As a faithful member of the Millis Church, I was still unhappy with both Paul and Lilia for breaking our marriage vows. I knew they didn't subscribe to my faith, but it was never pleasant to have someone disregard your values. And Rudy had obviously picked up on all of this.

He was afraid his suggestion might upset me. He was worried I might even take out my displeasure on his little sister. The boy was clearly anxious.

From his perspective, Norn, Aisha, and I were all equally family. And…given where things now stood, I ought to feel the same.

Still, was this really a good idea? What if breastfeeding Aisha made me feel anger or revulsion?

What if Rudy saw hatred on my face and despised me for it?

"Oh, really now. What are you going on about, Rudy? Come on, give me Aisha." I answered in the kindest voice I could, trying to shake off my own uncertainty.

"Of course," Rudy said.

Slowly, hesitantly, he deposited Aisha into my arms.

After exposing the opposite breast from the one Norn had just been using, I lifted her up to it.

I probably would have felt a bit upset if Aisha had kicked up a fuss at this point, but she latched right on to me and started gulping down milk immediately. Too quietly for Rudy to hear, I breathed a little sigh of relief.

I felt the exact same way I did when I was feeding Norn. My heart was full of a warm, pleasant awareness of my own motherhood, and nothing else.

How odd. Why had I hesitated, even slightly, to bring Aisha to my breast? Why had I thought this would make me feel unhappy? Why did I think of this as some trial I had to endure?

It was all so much simpler than I'd thought. I was a mother. Nothing else really mattered.

Whether you're a member of the Millis Church or not…it doesn't really make a difference when it comes to things like this.

“She’s certainly guzzling it down, isn’t she?”

“Uhm. Well, your milk is delicious, Mother.”

“That’s…an odd attempt at flattery, Rudy.”

Seeing Aisha happily suckling at my breast, and the contented expression on my own face, Rudy smiled with obvious relief. He clearly regarded protecting his little sisters to be his duty. Very admirable. His desire to become a good big brother, worthy of their adoration, seemed to be quite genuine.

“It’s not flattery. I still remember how it tasted.”

“Do you really now?”

Chuckling softly, I reached down to stroke Aisha’s little head. After a while, she finished up and took her mouth from my breast; only moments later, she was nodding off in my arms, so I lowered her back into her crib.

Rudy watched from a distance, his gaze warmer than usual.

“Hey, Rudy.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Mind if I stroke your head a bit?”

“You don’t need to ask my permission. Feel free to pet me anytime.”

After slowly sitting at my side, Rudy leaned his head toward me invitingly. I reached down and began to stroke it gently.

Rudy was our first child, and he never needed much from us. Most of the time, I didn’t feel like I was much of a parent to him. But recently, that had begun to change.

I truly was this boy’s mother. And he truly was my son.

Sensing a bit of warmth, I turned in its direction. Spring sunshine was streaming in through the window. Outside, golden fields of wheat stretched out as far as the eye could see. It was the picture of a peaceful spring afternoon. As I gazed quietly out at it, a sense of happiness washed over me.

For some reason, I felt utterly content. “I wish this moment could last forever.”

“Me too,” Rudy murmured with a nod.

I suppose he also found this little domestic scene pleasantly tranquil. But it was only thanks to him that I could feel the same.

If he hadn't intervened… as a pious member of the Millis Church reduced to one wife of two, I would probably have stormed out of this house with Norn, cursing my misfortune. Or stayed behind, perhaps to take out my resentment on Lilia and Aisha.

Thank goodness for Rudy.

If he wasn't such a wise and clever little boy, I never would have experienced this blissful moment.

"Rudy…"

"Yes, Mother?"

"Thank you for being born."

Startled, Rudy looked up at me. After an awkward pause, he scratched his head and answered in an adorably bashful tone of voice.

"Well…thank you for having me."

My only reply was another chuckle of amusement.

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